

Sensing the Shoal: Film and Lyric in the Anthropocene

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A shoal of fish moving in mesmeric unison; a haul of fish torn from the sea and dumped on the deck of a fishing trawler. What can these shoals tell us about our own position in the world in the age of the Anthropocene? Characterised by human activity and its ‘significant geological, morphological force,’ the Anthropocene is marked by the ecological damage attendant on capitalist production and expansion.¹ First coined at the turn of the millennium, the case to formalise the Anthropocene as a geological epoch was presented to the International Geological Congress by the Working Group on the Anthropocene on Monday 29 August 2016, attracting global news coverage.² Despite the clarity of evidence indicated by this potential formalisation, it remains as difficult as ever to comprehend the enormity of humanity’s species-wide agency, and harder still to do so without seeing our individual actions as impossibly small.

The arts are uniquely equipped to ponder the implications of the Anthropocene and to highlight what is, at root, a radical recalibration of humanity’s position in the world. Focusing on artistic representations of the sea from different media, this article explores the ways in which the seemingly innocuous body of a shoal of fish enables their considerations of ecological connectivity, control and causation that underlie humanity’s changing relationship to the earth and its waters. The shoal offers a model of connectivity and consciousness. Unlike alternative paradigms of the network or neuroaesthetics, the shoal is an ecological model: it is unpredictable, transient and ultimately alien. Both as a mass of creatures that are not sentient in the same way as humans and as a collectivity in which individual expressivity is seemingly sacrificed, the shoal appears to be far removed from the human individual. The artistic works I will study in this article work to reveal both the connectedness and power relations between the human and the shoal. Revealing the shoal’s vulnerability to human predation and anthropogenic maritime degradation, the works extend empathy toward these alien creatures. In turn, this consideration of our ecological connectedness highlights the internal connectivity of the human species.

The works I will consider are lyrics in poetry and in ethnographic film. This article explores how the works engage with and rework the fluid form of the lyric, and so, before introducing the works selected for study here, an initial consideration of the lyric form and the implications of taking the shoal as a lyric subject will be useful. The lyric is peculiarly suited to representations of both the sea and its

1 Paul Crutzen, Eugene Stoermer, ‘The Anthropocene’, in *IGBP News*, letter 41 (2000), pp. 17-18, here p.17.

2 Damian Carrington, ‘The Anthropocene epoch: scientists declare dawn of human-influenced age,’ in *Guardian*, 29. August 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/29/declare-anthropocene-epoch-experts-urge-geological-congress-human-impact-earth>> [accessed 29 August 2016].

human and non-human presences. With no set meter or rhyme scheme in poetry or narrative structure in film, the lyric's formal fluidity enables it to evoke the flux of the sea and its shoals. Meanwhile, its emphasis on perception provides a filter through which the reader or viewer can experience this most alien environment. A contested category with a long history, the lyric poem has been defined – usefully, if loosely – as being characterised by ‘brevity, subjectivity’ and a ‘persistent confusion [...] between cognitive and affective registers’.³ Within the shorter history of cinema, the lyric form has been developed in avant-garde film, in which, as Bruce Elder writes, ‘the lyric reveals a mind struggling to form sense through a creative process that depends upon imagery and sound patterns’.⁴

If it is ‘a commonplace’ that the lyric ‘presents reality through the filter of a thoroughly individuated subject,’ it could be expected that the lyric subject would offer a mooring point among the fluidity of the sea.⁵ However, both the ethnographic film and poem under discussion here take the lyric from the commonplace to the communal by dint of taking the shoal as their unstable lyric subject. In this seemingly faceless body, subjectivity is distributed across its members. If the lyric is traditionally invested in the individual subject whilst ethnography explores the collective, how does representing multiple, alternately embodied and disembodied subjects stretch these forms beyond their traditional stable subjects and communities? Can experiencing this artistic work have an effect on the subjectivity of the viewer or reader, heightening an awareness of our own ecological connectedness?

To elucidate these questions, I will compare the openings of Jorie Graham's lyric poem ‘Prayer’⁶ and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's and Véréna Paravel's ethnographic film *Leviathan*.⁷ The formal, aesthetic and ideological differences of these contemporary American works sit alongside their shared interest in engendering a renewed and more deeply felt sense of the relationship of the human and the sea. These works both offer a sensory encounter with pelagic shoals (that is, the shoals of the sea). The shoal on the page of Graham's poem is alive and free, restricted only by the limits of currents and group movement. Meanwhile, on screen, *Leviathan's* shoal, torn from its native element and transferred to the deck of a fishing trawler, is a dead and dying haul.

A poem under a page long, Graham's ‘Prayer’ is at first glance a typical lyric and its poetic intentions have been described by the poet herself as an attempt to ‘capture an act of consciousness’ in all its simultaneity of sensations and thought.⁸ One of the foremost lyric poets of her generation, the diverse ways in which Jorie Graham reworks the lyric form and her own style have been long recognised, however, and this poem is no exception to her continued efforts.⁹ That Graham opens *Never* (2002) — the collection in which her ecological concerns come to the fore — with a poem contemplating the movements of a shoal of minnows is just one indication of how enabling the shoal is, for both Graham's development of ecological consciousness, and for her expansion of lyric subjectivity.

3 Stephen Cushman, C. Cavanagh, J. Ramazani and P. Rouzer (eds.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton; Woodstock: Princeton UP, 2012), p. 826.

4 Bruce Elder, *A Body of Vision: Representations of the Body in Recent Film and Poetry* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1997), p. 94.

5 Elder, *A Body of Vision*, p. 96.

6 Jorie Graham, *Never* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), p. 3.

7 *Leviathan*, dir. by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel (Cinema Guild, 2012).

8 ‘Emotion, Cognition and Consciousness’, in *Talk of the Nation: Science Friday*, NPR, 10 October 2003.

9 Helen Vendler, *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham* (Cambridge; London: Harvard UP, 1995).

The shoal is an equally generative point of conception for the film, *Leviathan*, although by the time it is seen by the camera, it is as a dead and dying haul. Taking the haul as an equal subject with the other human and nonhuman creatures encircling the fishing-trawler, the film's continual shifts between subjects is widely recognised as central to the film's destabilising ontology.¹⁰ *Leviathan* is indisputably a hybrid work: its fusion of an ethnographic investment in the real and the abstraction of contemporary art can be traced to the self-avowed aims of the place where it was produced. Harvard University's Sensory Ethnography Lab, of which *Leviathan* is a seminal work, aims to engage in 'innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography'.¹¹ Not restricted to the aesthetics of contemporary art, however, I argue that the film's emphasis on sensation and embodied images also aligns it with the lyric.

The importance of sensation as an alternative means of sense-making, and how this is subsumed within the mind's attempt to reach clarity, resonates with Castaing-Taylor's and Paravel's film and Graham's poetry alike. Analysing the audience's first encounters with the shoal in these very different lyric works, this article explores the potential the shoal of fish holds for catalysing new forms of representation and new forms of subjectivity beyond 'human exceptionalism', defined by Donna Haraway as 'the premise that humanity alone is not a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies'.¹² To do so, I will now attend to the audience's first encounters with the shoal, first turning to 'Prayer' and then to *Leviathan*.

'Prayer': The Shoal 'Over a Dock Railing'

The opening poem of Graham's collection *Never* opens with the observation of the motion of a shoal: 'Over a dock railing, I watch the minnows, thousands, swirl'.¹³ This observation becomes an experience, at once sensory and contemplative, that builds to generate an ethical reflection about humanity's position in the world. As such, the poem 'Prayer' demonstrates the core aims of Graham's use of the lyric. The shoal of fish mesmerises the lyric 'I' of the poem, who begins with stable contemplation, 'watch[ing] the minnows' (p.3), but soon gets caught up in their swirling movement. This sensory encounter with the swirling shoal becomes a transformative experience for the poem's narrator. When the poem returns to the narrating subject in the closing lines, it is, I argue, a different lyric 'I' to that of the poem's opening. It is what I will term a 're-singularised' self, a less calcified subjectivity that is simultaneously individual and consciously situated within its species and broader ecologies.

The poem's first section, which Graham herself describes as 'a single sentence full of nesting parentheses,' moves with the lyric 'I' as she and the reader are caught up in the shoal's movements.¹⁴ Here, the words of the poem on the page, like its narrator, swirl with the shoal in free verse lines:

10 Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn, 'Leviathan: An Ethnographic Dream', in *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 31, n. 1 (2015), pp. 49-53, here p. 50.

11 'Homepage', in *Sensory Ethnography Lab* (2015), <<https://sel.fas.harvard.edu>>, [accessed 3 August 2015].

12 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 11.

13 Graham, 'Prayer', p. 3. Further page references to this work are given in parentheses in the text.

14 'Emotion, Cognition and Consciousness', in *Talk of the Nation: Science Friday*, NPR, 10 October 2003.

More and more by

each glistening minute, through which infinity threads itself,
also oblivion, of course, the aftershocks of something
at sea.

(p.3)

This evokes the shoal of minnows — with their ‘glistening’, ‘thread[ing]’ passage within ‘the aftershocks of something at sea’ — but the visual and temporal metaphor is now unmoored from its referent. This enables it to mediate between the poet’s considerations of the human species and the newly re-singularised lyric ‘I’ which closes the poem. The return to the self, to the individual, is central to Jorie Graham’s ethical intentions for her poetry and the ability for the poem and the human subject to hold a sense of agency and responsibility, even whilst considering our position as individual members of a species operating within unseen forces of change. Graham describes the poem as reaching a ‘sense of moral and ethical predicament’: it is not a conclusion, but a starting point for the renewed lyric subject.¹⁶ The hope is that it will also be a beginning for the renewed subjectivity of the reader, one more attuned to the ethical implications of their relatedness to their species and environment.

The minnows, then, provide a lens through which the poem questions how humans, as a collective, can act ethically in the age of the Anthropocene. As well as fusing the shoal and the human species as collectives both operating within broader forces, the structure of the collection as a whole implies a darker aspect of human agency. In the notes to the poem ‘Evolution’, Graham reveals that one species becomes extinct every nine minutes in a phenomenon known as ‘ecocide’, and that this knowledge ‘inhabits, as well as structures, the book’.¹⁷ Expressly linking this ‘nine-minute span’ with the length of time it may take to read ‘any poem here before you,’ Graham makes each poem a eulogy for a different species.¹⁸ Does it also, as Catherine Karagueuzian has argued, suggest a ‘denigration of her poetry’, or rather a renewed urgency in Graham’s avowed project of mobilising the reader’s conscience into action?¹⁹ In other words, when is the contemplation of the horror of ‘ecocide’ a necessary and generative act, and when does it risk turning into stasis? ‘Prayer’ poses but cannot answer this question, revealing the complex entanglements of action and passivity through its reflections on the ambiguous intentionality of the shoal. If the structural motif of the collection which ‘Prayer’ opens emphasises the fragility of the shoal and places humans as its predators implicitly, in *Leviathan*, to which I now turn, the vulnerability of the shoal at the hands of humans is more brutally explicit.

16 ‘Emotion, Cognition and Consciousness’.

17 Graham, *Never*, p. 111.

18 Ibid.

19 Catherine Karagueuzian, *No Image There and the Gaze Remains: The Visual in the Work of Jorie Graham* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 179.

***Leviathan*: The Haul on Deck**

Like ‘Prayer,’ the opening sequence of *Leviathan* follows a movement from human to shoal. This progression, however, is much less linear and less direct than that which Graham’s poem traces from lyric subject through the shoal to a re-singularised self. In fact, in an opening sequence unfolding over nearly thirty minutes, it takes nearly a third of the film to finally immerse the viewer in the shoal. Before then, *Leviathan* moves almost seamlessly through all of the other members of the pelagic ecology surrounding the shipping trawler, from that of the fish, flocking gulls and the human workers to that of the ocean and of the ship itself. *Leviathan* was filmed on small waterproof GoPro cameras, attached to the filmmakers’ and crewmen’s bodies; to sticks that are plunged into crates of fish and held overboard in water and air; and on rarer occasions, strapped to the ship itself. The multiplicity of perspectives that emerge from the footage – described by Eirik Frisvold Hanssen as ‘the disembodied, the transgression of one particular, subjective vantage point’ – creates a destabilising experience for the viewer.²⁰ This experience radically challenges human exceptionalism since the human subject is relativized as merely a single member of one species in an ecologically connected world.

Before turning to the opening of the film, it is worth considering the implications of the film’s title. Of interest here is the way in which the film embodies and expands Timothy Clark’s conceit of humanity as a Leviathan.²¹ Clark’s Leviathan is a reformulation of Thomas Hobbes’ seminal image of the Leviathan as a ‘mighty creature, composing many individuals, that makes up that more-than-personal entity, the state’.²² Clark recalibrates Hobbes’ image to better reflect the dangers of humanity’s species-wide agency in the age of the Anthropocene. Rather than ‘produc[ing] internal order and security’ as in Hobbes’ 1651 treatise, Clark’s ‘super-Leviathan’, ‘made up of lots of smaller Leviathans’ is a ‘self-destructive and self-deluding figure’.²³ Insofar as the Leviathan of Castaing-Taylor’s and Paravel’s title can signify the human endeavour of industrial fishing, the film is a cautionary elaboration of Clark’s conceit. But the polysemous title can also suggest a Leviathan made up of the trawler’s prey rather than its predators. Here, the order and security of the bounded human figure, still present in Clark’s image, gives way to the unstable porosity of a crushable shoal.

The instability of *Leviathan*’s shoal is evident from the very opening of the film. Whilst Graham’s poem begins with grounded contemplation before moving into a sensory immersion in the swirling minnows, the opening of *Leviathan* is immediately and completely disorientating. The film opens on black with the sound of whistling wind and crashing waves. Into the darkness, splashes of colour and shapes evocative of abstract impressionism emerge accompanied by the sounds of clanging metal.²⁴ In these initial disorientating minutes, which are seemingly unmediated by an identifiable subject, the viewer attempts to establish the perspective and content of these sights and sounds. Only gradually does the

20 Eirik Hanssen, “‘His Eyes Are Like Rays of Dawn’: Color Vision and Embodiment in *Leviathan*”, in *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 31, n.1 (2015), pp. 20-26, here p. 21.

21 Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 14–16.

22 Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, p. 15.

23 Ibid.

24 For an evocative description of colour in the opening sequence, see Hanssen’s astute discussion of the implications of the paradox of *Leviathan*’s disembodied embodiment (pp. 20–26).

viewer locate them as those of a fishing trawler. Yet it becomes apparent more slowly that the camera's perspective is defined by the movements of the body of a member of the crew.



Image 1: *Leviathan's* disorientating opening (6m), Eye Steel Film, Courtesy of Cinema Guild: 8 (CC - Commercial Use and Mods Allowed), <https://www.flickr.com/photos/eyesteel/8572278389/in/photolist-e4ALsQ-e4vbQi-e4AM7S-e4AMtU-e4ALRE-e4ALZ7-e4AMhf-e4vaHg-e4ALo1-e4vby2> [accessed 09. December 2016]

This crew member is heard giving unintelligible instructions to another worker who is attempting to unravel knotted chains. When experienced in surround sound as intended, the human voices are rendered much less intelligible than when watched in mono which loses multiple channels of machinic and elemental sound. After laborious minutes of physical preparation on the part of the crew, and physical acclimatisation and mental anticipation on the part of the audience, a net bursting with fish is raised from the sea. When the net releases the haul into the large wooden crate on the deck, the viewer's eyes are drawn to it with the same impulse that attracts eyes to a car crash. However, the camera, still attached to a worker, quickly moves away from the haul to focus on preparing the net for the next catch. The dying fish are still visible in the lower half of the shot, and so the gaze of the viewer and of the labourer remain in conflict. The camera's restricted perspective does not allow the viewer to fully contemplate the multitude of the shoal's death, a horror that to the fishermen has been lost through the banality of repetition. This acts as a lesson in the ways in which we all block out the vastness of our own deleterious impacts on the environment and its human and nonhuman inhabitants.

After this partial view of the shoal, the camera moves between all of the other presences on and around the shipping trawler. The camera moves with the crew, becomes entangled in the ship's netting and traces the uncannily intestinal rope, before dropping into the ocean itself and flying with the gulls; all of this before the viewer is finally and suddenly immersed in the dying shoal. Rather than taking on the perspectives of any of these diverse subjects, the GoPro cameras generate a disconcerting proximity to the creatures surrounding the fishing trawler. Whilst in 'Prayer', Graham's lyric subject gets caught up in the movements of the free shoal of minnows as soon as catching sight of it, in *Leviathan* this visceral

immersion in the dying haul is the culmination of the opening sequence. In an unprecedented cinematic experience, the camera moves around the crate sloshing with the haul, which is already largely dead. The intestines of the fish protrude from their mouths and, intermittently, a horrifying convulsion reminds us that these beasts are dying as we watch. Had the film opened with this, the effect might have been to close the viewer off to this horror. To make the viewer truly encounter the suffering of the shoal and perhaps to feel compassion across the species boundary, it is necessary to break down the viewer's sense of themselves as invulnerable, stable and unconnected. The flux of the opening sequence undermines the viewer's Copernican bearings and puts them at the mercy of the turmoil of the trawler in order that, when finally immersed in the shoal, they might be ready to contemplate their connectedness to the vulnerable shoal as members of this aqueous ecology. The withholding of the shoal's arrival also works to generate a sense of the proliferation of the unnatural hauls amassed by a rapacious fishing industry and of the interminable labour performed by the fishermen. This excess stretches *Leviathan* beyond the characteristic brevity of lyric films in the avant-garde tradition into the distended temporality of multiple long-takes.



Image 2: The haul on deck (*Leviathan* 24m), Eye Steel Film, Courtesy of Cinema Guild: 10 (CC - Commercial Use and Mods Allowed), <https://www.flickr.com/photos/eyesteel/8573370572/in/photolist-e4ALsQ-e4vbQi-e4AM7S-e4AMtU-e4ALRE-e4ALZ7-e4AMhf-e4vaHg-e4ALo1-e4vby2> [accessed 09. December 2016]

The viewer's implication in the destruction they are witnessing is highlighted by the following scene, equally characterised by graphic proximity and continuing shifts in subject positions. The film now turns to the butchery that follows the capture. Initially, the camera sits within the over-sized bucket of indistinguishable fish. It moves gradually from the unidentified mass to focus on the fish that is currently being butchered. The following shift, barely perceptible, moves to focus on the hands of the worker wielding the knife, highlighting the precision and speed of this well-practiced action. As well as heightening the film's disorientation, the lack of a clear juxtaposition between subject positions has ethical valence. In its recalibration of the position of the human in relation to the fish, the film neither shies away from the undeniable power relations inherent in the death of the fish nor demonises the workers as

butchers. In turn, the viewer's undeniable kinship with the human labourers is juxtaposed with the fact that the viewer is in actual fact safe and dry in the cinema, consuming the film as the majority of people consume fish caught in this way. As such, *Leviathan's* lyric capability of heightening consciousness and its documentary mode of bearing witness combine to form an implicit critique of the commercial fishing that involves the viewer in the tangle of relations of pelagic ecologies in the age of the Anthropocene.

Leviathan's disjointed perspectives dispersed across multiple beings create a strangely evacuated yet viscerally embodied subjectivity. This is redolent of poet and critic Susan Stewart's description of the lyric's 'weird simultaneous emphasis on and evacuation of the first person'.²⁵ In this way, *Leviathan*, like 'Prayer', stretches the lyric beyond a single unitary subject, yet remains thoroughly embodied. In so doing, Graham, Paravel and Castaing-Taylor are reworking the lyric form as commonly understood by drawing on and expanding what is in fact a central aspect of the lyric. Following philosopher Theodor Adorno, at the core of the lyric form is a tension between the single consciousness through which it is mediated and the universal or unspecified humanity from which that subjectivity emerges as distinct.²⁶ This foundational attribute enables the lyric to mediate the same dialectic of individual and mass, the one and the faceless many. If in the lyric, the singular emerges from the communal, in the shoal, subjectivity is always already distributed, yet can never reach individualisation as understood from a human perspective.

Conclusion

This article began by asking what aesthetic possibilities the shoal holds for lyric and cinematic forms and whether pelagic encounters on screen and on the page can generate an ecological consciousness in their audience. I have argued that in their representations of shoals, both Graham and collaborators Castaing-Taylor and Paravel work toward a communal lyric form that stretches the limits of representation, sensation and subjectivity. In 'Prayer's' fusion of human and pelagic subjects and *Leviathan's* shifts between them, both works generate a new lyric subjectivity, one that is strangely evacuated and disembodied but viscerally felt. Whilst their original forms of lyric and ethnography have a respective focus on the individual and the collective, through their representations of the body of the shoal – an unstable mass entirely composed of individuals – 'Prayer' and *Leviathan* transcend binary modes of understanding human experience as individual or communal. This ability to think on the level of the individual and the collective at the same time is, I argue, vital in the Anthropocene and at a moment of ecological crisis in which individual agency and collective action, both equally necessary, are threatened by feelings of powerlessness and apathy.

The shoal's ambiguous intentionality pondered by Graham's poem, 'Prayer', and the strange sentience evoked by *Leviathan's* images of the death-throes of the fish show that the shoal does not fully

25 Rei Terada, 'Review: *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Susan Stewart, 2002', in *Comparative Literature*, vol. 56, n. 3 (2004), pp. 269-274, here p. 269.

26 Theodor Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', in *Notes to Literature*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), pp. 37-54.

give itself up to human comprehension, contemplation or representation. Nevertheless, as my readings have demonstrated, both *Leviathan* and 'Prayer' reach toward a fleeting and partial connection with this inescapably alien body; and an uncanny likeness is sensed. The works infuse this renewed awareness of ecological connectedness with the shoal with a recognition of the power relations and human agency that mark the age of the Anthropocene. As such, the shoal enables these works to challenge human exceptionalism and to reveal our ecological connectedness in a way that does not abscond us of responsibility.

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