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Film and Media Studies  
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# Identities, Multiplications, and Immersive Landscapes



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ldavid@ms.sapientia.ro

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# Film in Depth. Water and Immersivity in the Contemporary Film Experience

Adriano D'Aloia

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Milan)

E-mail: [adriano.daloia@unicatt.it](mailto:adriano.daloia@unicatt.it)

**Abstract.** Since its beginnings, cinema has recognised that water can visually give *matter* and *meaning* to human desires, dreams and secrets, eliciting suspense and fear. Using different aesthetical and technical strategies, contemporary cinema shows immersed and drowning bodies to represent and express intimacy and protection, suspense and fear, obsession and depression, state of shock, past or infancy trauma, hallucinations and nightmares, etc. The case of *enwaterment* (i.e. “water-embodiment”) is significant because of its relevance to the point where psychoanalysis and philosophy meet. In this essay, I attempt to investigate what is actually meant today by making a bodily and sensible experience of film by analysing the substance of water and the figures of the drowning and immersed body. Cinema embodies aquatic modalities of perception and expression, pulling the viewer into a liquid environment that is the confluence between the film-body and the filmgoer-body.

*The pupil is made of water.*

Aristotle, *De Anima*, III

*The true eye of the earth is water.*

Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves*, 1942

A deep relationship binds water and cinema. Images and sounds stream on the screen like an inexhaustible flow of water, a ‘mechanical fluidity’ that perfectly expresses the spirit of modern times. In the beginning, cinema aimed both to provide a fluid rendering of reality and to astonish the spectators by shocking their senses. In *Panorama of Gorge Railway* (Thomas Edison, 1900), for example, the stream of an impetuous river is combined with the motion of the camera, placed on the front end of a train, in the opposite direction. The conflict between the movement of the water and that of the camera, and the

masses of spray and foam that seem to fly at and wet the camera, emphasise the spectators' sense of motion. The foaming waves of the sea have a key part in early British films like *Rough Sea at Dover* (Birt Acres, 1895), *Dover Pier in a Storm* (Cecil M. Hepworth, 1900) and *Breaking Waves* (Cecil M. Hepworth, 1900). In watching American falls from above, American side (Thomas Edison, 1896), the spectator experiences the power of waterfalls, even if the film consists of a single stationary shot. In *Sutro Baths, Sutro Baths, No. 1* and *Lurline Baths* (Thomas Edison, 1897), a series of short films set in two swimming pools in San Francisco, the descent of bathers from the slipway and the swarming crowd in the pool create splashes of water up towards the camera, with an effect similar to that of the river foam in *Panorama of Gorge Railway*. The mechanical nature of cinematic fluidity emerges in *Les bains de Diane à Milan* (Louis Lumière, 1896) and *Bathers* (Cecil M. Hepworth, 1900), where through reverse motion, human bodies dive into and seemingly come out of the water. Very soon, water begins to immerse the body of the characters completely, e.g. in *Visite Sous-Marine du Maine* (Georges Méliès, 1898) and *Divers: Diving for Treasure* (Robert W. Paul, 1900). These films suggest an analogy between the transparency of water and the act of vision, evoking a conception of film viewing as an immersive experience that is capable not only of shocking and astonishing the spectator, but also of inviting and involving him or her into a specific 'sensorial space.'

Plenty of water has passed under the bridge of cinema since it took its first exploratory steps. In this essay, I argue that the choice of water as a setting and the expressive use of its properties (e.g. depth, density and transparency) as stylistic solutions in contemporary mainstream narrative cinema are functional to the constitution of specific 'water-based' film experiences. More and more often, contemporary cinema presents crucial scenes that represent immersed and drowning bodies in order to involve the spectators in an enveloping and breathtaking experience. Moreover, many contemporary films embody 'aquatic' modes of expression and perception, even if water is not explicitly used as a subject or a setting. These films tend to 'enwater' the spectators, i.e. embody them in water, in an immersive and fluid experience. Today the film-theatre is not simply a marvelous aquarium that confines the spectator to appreciating fine specimens at a distance, like in early cinema, but it is rather a huge pool, an ocean bed, a swampy marsh or a limpid bay in which spectators experience a sense of being engulfed and dragged toward the waterfall of perception, or getting sucked into a whirlpool of emotion.

Immersivity has become a distinctive trait of the theatrical experience, which is forced to resort to new and enhanced solutions in order to contend with the impoverishment of the viewing experience caused by the process of relocation.

Relocation is causing the film experience to ‘migrate’ from one place to another, from its ‘motherland’ to new frontiers: a film can be watched in various places, in various individual and interpersonal contexts, and by means of various devices and screens (Casetti 2009, 62). This process does not simply concern the locations where films are viewed, nor the aesthetic or textual characteristics of films, nor the technical platforms of film delivery. Rather, it consists in the ‘displacement’ of the experience: a corpus of social and cultural needs, rules and pleasures that arose with the advent of cinema, developed as it evolved, and that are still present today in the ‘relocated cinematic practices.’ The main response of theatrical cinema to this scenario has been to search for new and enhanced forms of immersivity, refining its technical means and special effects in order to provide the spectator with both the impression of really being in the space of the fictional events depicted and an intense sensorial experience (via special effects, CGI, 3D, etc.).

Inevitably, the appearance of water on the screen gives rise to a whole series of possible inherent meanings. Since ancient times, the element of water has represented the ‘great mother,’ the substance that generates life on Earth. For Thales of Miletus, water is the origin of every vital principle, the source from which every living thing stems. According to Empedocles, all matter is comprised of four ‘roots,’ or elements. Knowledge originates in the encounter between an element within a human being and the same element outside of him/her: “for with earth do we see earth, with water water, with air bright air, with fire consuming fire, with Love do we see Love, Strife with dread Strife” (Empedocles, B 109 – see: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/empepedocles/>). This idea is further developed by Aristotle to assert that the elements all arise from the interplay between the archetypal properties of hotness and coldness, dryness and wetness. Water is wet and cold and its qualities are fluidity and flexibility, the ability to adapt to external conditions (Aristotle 1998). As a consequence, water tends to be expansive, since it can fill spaces in its surroundings. In *De Anima*, Aristotle divides the senses into two categories: the senses of touch and taste that apprehend their objects by direct contact, and the ‘distance-senses’ – sight, hearing and smell – that approach their objects without immediate contact. The objects of sight are perceptible through media. The medium of sight is composed of simple elements, i.e. air and water. The power of sight must be realised in an organ made of a transparent liquid, in order that it be receptive of colour and light (Aristotle 1993, III: 1).

The figures of Poseidon/Neptune, Aphrodite/Venus, Narcissus and Ulysses testify that water has a crucial role in both Greek and Latin mythology. It is also thus in the Jewish and Christian tradition. In Genesis, “Darkness covered the deep and the Spirit of God hovered over the water” (Genesis 1: 2). The flood

extended over all the Earth from which Noah and his family and livestock were saved in the ark (Genesis 6–9). In the New Testament, water is a means of purification, a factor of regeneration. The Baptism of Christ in the Jordan symbolises purification and new birth (John 1: 29–33). Blood and water flow from his side during the Crucifixion (John 19: 34). In any religious context, waters disintegrate and dissolve forms, and wash away sins; they are at once purifying and regenerating. Purification and contamination, life and death, transparency and opacity... These ambiguous roots of the meaning of water in Western culture are reflected in literature, figurative art and, of course, in cinema. On the one hand, in a continuation of the 'attractive' tendency of early cinema, water is a means of engendering physical involvement by astonishing the spectator; on the other hand, the symbolic meanings of water implicitly emerge on the surface of the screen, to the extent that even in the most intellectual and symbolised cinematographic uses of water – consider, for example, Tarkovsky's works – the perceptual and tangible consistency of images and sounds and their symbolic meanings are mutually embodied.

As cinema has developed, it has aspired to being more than a mere attraction and, accordingly, it has focused on the metaphorical and symbolic meanings of water. For example, in *Terje Vigen* (Victor Sjöström, 1916), the sea is used as a backdrop to the main character's rage against the evil fate. In *Mother* (Vsevolod I. Pudovkin, 1926), the happiness of the prisoner for his imminent freedom is expressed by the non-diegetic inserts of the fresh waters of a stream. Filmmakers quickly recognised the expressive potential of water and allowed it to permeate the language of film: just consider the bobbing, wave-like opening titles of *Emak Bakia* (Man Ray, 1926) or the fading images of *Étoile de mer* (Man Ray, 1928). In the 1920s and 1930s, French directors (e.g. L'Herbier, Epstein and Vigo) profusely used the visual and dramaturgic richness of water and created solutions inspired by its dynamic properties, e.g. flou, superimposition, filters, and out-of-focus, marking "a passage from a mechanics of solids to a mechanics of fluids... [Water] provided better conditions to pass from the concrete to the abstract, a greater possibility of communicating an irreversible duration to movements, independently of their figurative characters, a more certain power of extracting movement from the thing moved" (Deleuze 1986, 43). In *Ménilmontant* (Dimitri Kirsanov, 1924), the shocked state of the protagonist is visualised through the superimposition of her face and the streaming river water into which she is contemplating throwing herself to commit suicide (like a modern Ophelia). In *L'Atalante* (Jean Vigo, 1934), the slow flow of the river on which the boat floats is a metaphor of life and love, until the scene in which Jean dives into the river and has a vision of his love Juliette. The series of Jean Epstein's documentary films set in coastal Britain is particularly significant in order to explain the concept of

‘paysage-acteur,’ namely that nature on screen has the same role as actors in dramatic films and is subject to the same detailed critical analysis (see Epstein 1974–75). In *Le Tempestaire* (Jean Epstein, 1947), “Epstein was able to express it from the inside, the viewer is absorbed by it. The heart of the storm is suggested by a sense of entrapment and engulfment. The filmmaker uses the cliffs to create dives into the body of water” (Dulac 2008). [Fig. 1.]

## **Water in Contemporary Narrative Cinema**

In the wake of this centuries-old tradition, contemporary cinema exploited the capability of water, visually and aurally, to give a palpable form to human desires and dreams. Water is often represented or evoked in film as a substance that submerges something that is destined to re-emerge. Through its semantic fluidity, cinema lets the unconscious drift before the eyes of the spectators and infiltrate their limpid gaze. A psychological malaise affects the main characters and has to be washed away with clean water.

For example, in the finale of *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2004), Virginia Woolf fills her pockets with stones and commits suicide by allowing the current of the river to engulf her. In *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), to prevent Truman from discovering reality, the show’s creators stage his father’s death in a storm while on a fishing trip and instil Truman with a fear of water. Water surrounds the city where Truman lives, Sea Haven, a sort of postmodern Atlantis submerged in the television reality. The separation of a son from his father is represented in the muddy waters of a sewer even in animation films, e.g. *Ratatouille* (Brad Bird, 2007). In *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), John Anderton’s son has been kidnapped in a crowded swimming pool. In this film, water receptacles form a recurring motif, e.g. the warm pool in which ‘precogs’ are immersed evokes the pre-birth situation, and the icy water of a bathtub into which Anderton immerses himself in an attempt to keep a pack of menacing spider-like robots off his scent. In *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), after many vicissitudes during the foundering of the steamship, Jack Dawson dies in the icy water of the Atlantic Ocean. Water in a pool conducts electricity and kills a child in *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005). In *The Prestige* (Christopher Nolan, 2006), Robert Angier’s clones drown in water after each ‘transportation’ trick. In *What Lies Beneath* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000), water conceals the traces of criminal acts and compromising pieces of evidence, which are inevitably destined to emerge. Fear follows a new Acherons – the river of pain in Greek mythology – in *Cape Fear* (Martin Scorsese, 1991), *The River Wild* (Curtis Hanson, 1994), and *Insomnia* (Christopher Nolan, 2002).

Water in malicious and mysterious guise submerges the cinematic screen in science fiction films like *Sphere* (Barry Levinson, 1998). The destructive power of oceans swamp mankind in catastrophic films like *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder, 1998), *The Perfect Storm* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2000) and *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009). The endless expanse of the sea isolates humans as in *Cast Away* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000), or generates new Ulysses, new sirens, new Jonahs, new Noahs, as in *Waterworld* (Kevin Reynolds, 1995), *Master & Commander* (Peter Weir, 2003), *Lady in the Water* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2006) and *Big Fish* (Tim Burton, 2003). [Fig. 2.]

Dozens of other examples from the last fifteen years can be cited. And, of course, this tendency goes beyond the borders of Hollywood. In the poetic finale of *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993), as we hear Ada's mental voice, we see her body floating above her piano lying in the seabed. "There is a silence where hath been no sound," she says quoting Thomas Hood's poem *Silence*, "There is a silence where no sound may be. In the cold grave, under the deep deep sea." In *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007), the bodies of the characters interact with water of many different kinds, which can be considered the very vital principle of the plot: the fountain into which Cecilia jumps to retrieve the fragments of the broken vase, the basin in which Briony pretends to drown in order to be rescued by Robbie, and the water that floods the subway station used as a refuge and kills Cecilia. Water takes on intellectual meanings in *The Wild Blue Yonder* (Werner Herzog, 2005), in which underwater shots made under the ice of the South Pole are presented as if showing the liquid atmosphere of the alien water planet. Here water is the domain of the stranger, the mutable incarnation of ungraspable meanings, for the mind rather than for the senses. In *The Sea Inside* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2004), Ramón Sampedro's quadriplegia is caused by a dive from a rock in the Mediterranean Sea gone wrong. The scene of the accident returns in a flashback as the spectator experiences the interplay between the physical trauma and its psychological consequences.

In all these films and many others, water is a substance that particularly lends itself to the representation of nightmares, hallucinations, depression and trauma, an unusual place of concealment and refuge, an element that can wash away sin, or from which sin re-emerges. Water is strategically used as a substance capable of marking the passage from one psychological condition to another, and of 'hosting' a crucial event, e.g. loss, trauma, separation, or death. Cinematic water is an elusive fluid that stirs the innermost human drives and pours them forth to quench their thirst for fancy and aspiration, but it can also swallow them in a whirlpool of their fears. Troubles pass under the bridge of cinema and, nonetheless, as water appears on the screen, something menacing

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always lies in ambush – a sea monster, an oppressive past, a looming catastrophe, a tsunami. Not always does the river reach the vast horizon of the ocean and debouch the troubles that it bears along with it. This is particularly clear in science-fiction and horror movies, in which obscure forces and unforeseeable but imminent dangers come from deep water. From *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) onward, cinema has used water to give substance to ghosts in the unconscious, an abyss that is mental rather than physical.

## **Dreams of Water**

In Freudian psychoanalysis, the presence of water in dreams refers to the pre-utero state: “A large number of dreams, which are frequently full of anxiety, and whose content often involves the traversing of narrow spaces or staying long in the water, are based upon phantasies concerning the intra-uterine life, the sojourn in the mother’s womb, and the act of birth” (Freud 1913, 250). Immersion in water also means birth: “Dreams of this sort are parturition dreams; their interpretation is effected by reversing the fact recorded in the manifest dream-content; thus, instead of ‘flinging oneself into the water,’ read ‘coming out of the water’ – that is, ‘being born’” (Freud 1913, 250). Water is an insidious challenge for the senses. In *Phaedo*, Plato pointed out that a straight stick put in water appears bent (Plato 1993, 66a). The problem is to recognise and distinguish reality from the distorted images of what is not reality. And as Freud himself remembers, referring to Aristotle, “the best interpreter of dreams is he who can best grasp similarities. For dream-pictures, like pictures in water, are disfigured by the motion (of the water), so that he hits the target best who is able to recognise the true picture in the distorted one” (Freud 1913, 71).

As Carl G. Jung states in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, in dreams and fantasies the sea or any large expanse of water is the commonest symbol for the unconscious (Jung 1959, 18), the “deep valley of the psyche” (Jung 1959, 17–18). The way of the soul in search of something or someone that has been lost “leads to the water, to the dark mirror that reposes at its bottom” (Jung 1959, 17); “the treasure lies in the depths of the water” (Jung 1959, 24). Nonetheless, “this water is no figure of speech, but a living symbol of the dark psyche” (Jung 1959, 17). The *living* nature of the symbol of water suggested by Jung allows us to clarify that the use of water in cinema – to be conceived as the concrete and perceivable projection of an inner projection of the psyche – is not merely as a film setting, nor only an aesthetic solution to express the internal state of the character. Water is a substance capable of

directly communicating symbols and meanings to the spectator, reducing the separation between the fictional space *on* the screen and the psychic space *in front* of the screen. In the films cited – and in many others –, as water appears on the surface of the cinematic screen, its deep meanings loom up, with no recourse, on the part of the spectator, to cultural background or encyclopedic knowledge, nor to mental processes of inference and interpretation.

Inspired by both Jungian archetypes and his interest in alchemy, Gaston Bachelard pointed out in his study on the ‘imaginary waters’ in poetry and literature that water ranges from the clear, slow moving, innocent and transparent river, that is related to the natural beauty of a young naked woman, innocent and unmysterious (Bachelard 1983, 33), to the deep, ‘heavy’ and running waters that symbolise the passing of time and death (Bachelard 1983, 46). Bachelard argued that human imagination does not draw on interpretation, but rather it is supported by “direct images of matter” (Bachelard 1983, 8), images in which “the form is deeply sunk in a substance” (Bachelard 1994, ix). Daydreaming (*rêverie*) sends “waves” of the unreal into reality and allows the daydreamer to reach the sleeping waters within themselves. The sensorial and sensuous experience of matter, memory and imagination find expression in poetic imagery based on water: “A poet who begins with a *mirror* must end with the *water of a fountain* if he wants to present a *complete poetic experience*” (Bachelard 1983, 21–22). This experience takes place in physical spaces in which human beings dwell and that themselves influence human memories, feelings and thoughts. Inner and outer space – the mind and the world – are reciprocally implicated (Bachelard 1994, 201). If we include the film-theatre in the space of poetic experience, we may approach the water-based film experience as an immersion of the material imagination.

In approaching the film experience, pre-cognitive and pre-linguistic ‘knowledge’ has a crucial role. Every spectator has a primordial sense of liquidity or fluidity and has an (unconscious) memory of the in-utero state. We instinctively associate water and drinkable fluids in general with the act of swallowing or with the state of being thirsty; we contrast the solidity of our bodies to the liquidity of water, our opacity with its transparency, our stillness with its flowing, and, though we recognise a common substance of which both we and the world are made, we involuntarily associate the qualities of warmth or cold, fluidity or muddiness, with human expressive states, like relaxation or annoyance, safety or danger, calmness or impetuosity. Before any deliberate inferences are made, the spectators explore the ‘surface’ of the screen, with no recourse to cultural background or cognitive activity. Only after this ‘immediate’ approach to the expressive forces of film images do spectators dive into the depths and call on their socio-cultural knowledge and background skills in order to interpret the meaning.

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## Enwaterment

Cinema cannot avoid the tendency to use the concreteness and symbolism of water for its immersive purposes. The film experience is the elective situation in which meaning can be directly communicated and experienced by the spectator. The use of water and its properties in the construction of the film experience may be considered as a form of Bachelardian ‘materialising imagination,’ or a Jungian ‘living symbol’ that offers its symbolic meaning as something to be experienced, rather than and prior to being understood and interiorised. Cinema literally and metaphorically seeks to construct a ‘water-based’ environment, a sharable site of experience in which the spectator can feel fully involved. This result is achieved by the extension of the expressive properties of water outside the fictional space of the screen. In this sense, the cinematic screen can be ideally thought of as a surface lapped by the gentle rippling of the waves, broken by the violence of the storm, flooded by deep seas, and the film-theatre as a vessel that sails the oceans, a canoe launched on the rapids, a crowded submarine, or a diving suit. In this environment that is perceived and experienced as unitary and homogeneous, different waters merge, permeating and infiltrating the psychological space of the experience, providing immersive and intense opportunities for involvement. The film has a ‘liquid skin’ that is perceived by the spectator haptically (Marks 2000; 2002). In the films cited above, water is a stylistic solution capable of stimulating engagement on a number of levels, from the intensification of visual and aural perception to the enhancement of synaesthetic perception. The narrative role of water is functional to the eliciting of emotions and the cognitive process of attribution of meaning. Throughout this composite process of involvement, spectators experience a sense of immersion as if they had been placed in the space of representation.

The point is that water is not only a representational substance that effectively visualises and symbolises the characters’ psychic condition, but also a substance in which the film characters’ bodies are immersed or drown together with their troubles. The fluid properties of water find an expressive cinematic ‘translation’ in the choice of precise technical and stylistic solutions with which narrative mainstream contemporary cinema both physically and psychically engages the spectator in a ‘water-based relationship.’ In the remainder of this essay, I shall reflect on the connection between the expressive role of water and its ability to provide cinematic experiences of immersion and drowning for the spectator. As examples of this, I briefly analyse some successful fictional American films, in particular *A. I. – Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001) and *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004).

### ***Suspension of Perception***

*Enwaterment* specifically concerns aural and visual activity that is proper to the film experience. In *A. I.*, a group of children are playing beside a swimming pool and one of them tries to hurt the 'mecha' David with a knife to see if he can feel physical pain. Once pinched, David feels pain and, overtaken by fear, clutches at his human 'stepbrother' Martin and plunges them both into the swimming pool. Alerted by Martin's mother's scream for help, three men dive into the pool and free Martin from David's hold and rescue him from drowning. Nobody cares about David, who remains motionless at the bottom of the swimming pool (being a 'mecha,' he does not actually breathe). David's fear and disorientation are rendered with an effective point-of-view construction. In one type of shot he is shown staring at the top corner of the swimming pool, with a stunned expression and with open arms – as if in an unrequited embrace. The camera slowly approaches him, up to a close-up. The relative shot from the bottom of the swimming pool shows what David sees: Martin's unmoving feet just under the surface and the people trying to resuscitate him through the surface. These latter figures are distorted by the fluid, irregular movement of the water. The distortion of the perceptual world through the surface of water directly represents the disturbance of a psychological perspective and of social relationships. Mechas and humans inevitably live in different conditions and they cannot find mutual integration. The water surface acts as a sight-filter that offers a view into an altered, faraway and hostile world. This ineradicable separation is expressed through a different point-of-view that marks a difference in both social and ontological positions. The interesting fact is that David's perception is not distorted by a psychic or imaginative alteration, but rather by a 'natural' filter that *enwaters* his mental and emotional state. [Fig. 3.]

In this sequence, it is not only the optical perspective that is altered. David's immersion in the water also distorts aural perception. Human voices coming from the other side of the water surface are muffled, every movement produces an echoed noise, two curt splashes break the surface as men dive, bubbles envelop their bodies and a hollow and ever louder sound fills the scene... The spectator is aligned to David's 'point-of-hear' and each audible element is 'made' of water, with the effect of enhancing the watery nature of his perceptual experience. A liquid substance, with particular audible properties, lends an emotional charge to the movement.

Another good example of aural *enwaterment* is in the intense Normandy landings scene in *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998): captain John Miller falls into the sea and witnesses the dramatic deaths of his men. The bullets of the German defence force cross the water and clouds of blood pump

out of stricken Allied soldiers, who are dragged towards the seabed by the weight of their weapons. As he emerges and reaches the foreshore, the muffled sound enables spectators to experience the temporary suspension of his perception and his state of shock. Here too, it is interesting to note that water continues to affect captain Miller's perceptions even once his body is out of it.

In fact, the most 'aquatic' shot of the *A. I.* scene described above does not take place in the swimming pool, but on its edge. Before David and Martin fall into the pool, their mother turns her face, in response to Martin's cry for help. [Fig. 4.] Such a movement can be described as 'fluid,' a slowed-down and softened movement. With no manipulation of time, a slow-motion effect is obtained with a mirrored-parabolic movement of the camera with respect to the movement of the face and, at the same time, with a typical, cushioned, underwater sound. The spectator is already immersed in a liquid environment before any characters' bodies have plunged into the water: 'aquatic' modes of perception are not always achieved in water.

### ***Feet in the Water***

Scenes in which a character's body is completely surrounded by water help to illuminate how water can constitute the 'bodily environment' of the film experience, and how the spectators can experience the perceivable qualities of water. *Enwaterment* concerns the body and its entire sensoriality. "Diving into water, for example, or sinking into a bath, we are not only in the realm of the audiovisual sensorium; *all* our senses, in fact all of our body, is encapsulated, surrounded. In that sense, it is a *haptic* experience, not merely an optical one" (Holmberg 2003, 132). This sensation arises as a physiological reaction, before being interpreted in a narrative logic. The spectators' skin synaesthetically comes into contact with the water and they feel as if they were fully immersed in the film. Drowning scenes especially arouse spectators' sensory-motor responses, like breathlessness and a sense of choking. Spectators may actually hold their breath, and even feel as if they are suffocating. This happens in the swimming pool scene in *A. I.*, as, for example, in one of the final scenes of *The Prestige*, in which Alfred Borden tries in vain to rescue Robert Angier's clone from drowning; or Truman's sailing toward freedom in *The Truman Show*; or the race against time in *Titanic*, emotionally intensified by the progressive rising of the ocean water that floods the steamship's various rooms and passageways. It is as if water floods into the film-theatre and progressively submerges the spectators.

In this regard, a very interesting case is the presence of water in *Ray*. In this film, the protagonist's blindness accentuates spectators' tactile awareness.

Moreover, the spectator can share Ray's mental visions and see the hallucinations and nightmares caused by his psychological illness and drug addiction. There are five water-based fragments in the film. The first two depict Ray Charles's hallucinations. We first *see* Ray performing a tactile activity (he is packing his suitcase, he has been kissed and wipes his lips). Then we *hear* the noise of water. Only at this point does a close-up that is both audio and visual allow us to *see and hear* Ray's fingertips exploring the wet clothes, until he encounters a lifeless foreign body. Ray encounters the human limbs of a child (hands touch hands...). He is horrified and abruptly withdraws his hands and stumbles backward, and the spectators physiologically mirror his reaction by starting in fear in their seats. The synaesthetic strategy of film puts us in Ray's hands, so that the spectator experiences his sensory-motor activity. The spectators' physical body remains still 'in front of' the screen, but they instinctively 'simulate' actions and movements, through a form of physiological sensory-motor mirroring. The second hallucination is constructed with the same structure, but in this case Ray's feet are shown immersed in the water; he bends over the floor, and his hands encounter George's dead foot; he leaps up and stumbles backward. [Fig. 5.]

Here water is the most functional solution for expressing the trauma of the characters. The property of water that best fulfils this function is depth. Both hallucination sequences are characterised by the contrast between the shallow water that fills small recipients (the suitcase) or that covers wide surfaces (the floor) and the profound depth of his troubles. Ray's hallucinations lie in shallow water, but they plunge into the deep darkness of his soul. Both his body, and, synaesthetically, the spectator's body, are only partially immersed in the water, but both Ray's and the spectator's sensorial, cognitive and emotional experiential frameworks are entirely immersed in the liquid substance that infiltrates the past and pushes it to the surface. During his rehabilitation therapy, after a conversation with the doctor, Ray has other hallucinations in which he accesses his past by plunging into the tub. He goes into himself *in depth* to resolve the sense of guilt that haunts him. As he decides to face the present (he is addicted to heroin) by facing up to his past, he breaks the water's surface. Cinema conveys the psychological progress/regress dynamic with a deep/surface dynamic. [Figs. 6–7.]

### ***Narrative Flows***

Immersion and drowning are often strategically used at particular turning points of the plot (prologue/epilogue, climax, finale, etc.) and have a crucial role in narrative development. In *What Lies Beneath* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000), a female face appears first as a floating corpse in the dense, murky surface of the

lake, while later it is mysteriously reflected in the transparent and reflective (though menacing) water in the bathtub. The submerged crimes committed by Norman Spencer progressively emerge. His wife Claire uncovers the facts and then Norman's attempts on her life by letting her drown in the bathtub after having paralysed her. Claire fights against her husband, their truck veers off the bridge and plunges into the lake, where the dead body of Norman's previous victim drags him down. The body of his shameful past (the adultery and the homicide) comes back to life to take revenge. A range of depths and densities are used with a precise narrative function.

In *I, Robot* (Alex Proyas, 2004), troubling past events surface in Del Spooner's nightmares caused by his survivor's guilt: after a car accident, he was rescued by a robot instead of a little girl, who drowns in the water-filled vehicle. This painful precedent returns various times during the plot and progressively reveals Spooner's trouble and the reason for his distrust of robots. Moreover, the underwater style of the accident scene is used as a graphic style for the opening credits. This solution both anticipates the rest of the film and, in a way, imprints it with the substance of water. Also, in the opening credits of *The New World* (Terrence Malik, 2005), the network of canals visually evokes the spread of colonisation. In the first scene, the pleasure with which the bodies of the natives bathe in clear water is contrasted to the violence with which the huge English ships sail the seas, announcing the imminent transition from a 'primitive' state in harmony with the natural environment to the 'civilisation' that imposes the domination and the violation of the landscape.

Usually, water offers a solution to signal the passage to another temporal framework of the events, e.g. a cross-fade before a flashback. In *The Truman Show* – another film which is sprinkled with references to water throughout (the sea that killed his father, the ditch that surrounds his town and his life, the only way for freedom...) – the flashback to Truman's college years begins with eddying water, as when the surface is broken by a stone, signifying a plunge into the past. This solution imitates the cross-fade and superimposition, typical aquatic formal solutions that visualise the idea of the merging of space and time, the soft and liquid transition from one place to another, from one time to another, from one state of things to another, the echo of the past in the present and vice-versa.

In the two sequences from *Ray* analysed above, water is initially kept off-screen. The passage from reality to the hallucination sequences is, as it were, *en abyme*, with no recourse to cross-fade, or perceptual alteration, nor any explicit signs of narrative cuts or a standard solution for signalling such a change. This stylistic choice aims to surprise the spectators at the moment when water appears on screen. In other water-based fragments of the film, we witness the

emersion of the trauma from his painful past experience. In Ray's nightmares, the spectator finally comprehends the cause of his crisis, and once again water is a very effective stylistic solution for representing this immersion/emersion dynamic. During the medication treatment, Ray has a nightmare in which the water becomes blood and the whole world is transformed by solarised photography and a stormy montage. Blood-coloured water leaks from the tub onto the camera lens, that is, onto the screen. Waters of the past overflow and merge with waters of the present, flowing toward the sea and healing old wounds.

### ***Cutting Surfaces***

The surface of the water inevitably refers to the surface of the cinematic screen. As water appears on the screen, one surface cuts another. Water makes the screen a fluid and interconnecting threshold between two places, between here and there, between present and past, conscious and unconscious, waking and sleeping, life and death. Just as the screen both separates and brings together the fictional and the actual world, water is also a plane of separation and connection between two different but not incompatible worlds.

When the water surface meets the screen at right angles (i.e. the frame is split perpendicularly by the edge of the water), this offers a specific point of view, e.g. the 'awash shots' in *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975). By embodying the perceptual frame of a shark, the camera immediately creates a high level of suspense that is experienced bodily by the spectator. This stylistic solution is, in fact, a particular type of split screen, or even a special kind of internal editing. The splitting acts both at a visual level and at an ontological level, dividing the world into the human and the non-human (e.g. monsters, animals, robots and replicants).

The line of the water surface may also intersect the body. In Ray's nightmares, only the limbs of his brother George are visible. In the flashback that makes the spectators aware of Ray's past trauma, in fact, a close-up shows George's feet slipping and his falling into a rinse tub. While he is drowning, the camera shows his tumbling legs, until they stop, in front of Ray's shocked gaze. George's body is a divided body, split into two worlds by the water in the tub. The surface is a space of appearing and disappearing, through which something emerges and something is immersed. Water cuts and sutures, gives life and kills.

In *A. I.* as well, the surface explicitly splits the body with no actual cut: we see the legs and the feet of Martin, David's stepbrother, this time returning from motionlessness to movement, from death to life. The two last shots of this sequence are particularly important in order to understand another aspect of

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*enwaterment*. In the first shot, David sees Martin brought away by his mother and his father. Their figures, deformed by the movement of water, move away until they disappear from David's field of view. David is eventually left alone. The image of their absence continues to fluctuate. The second shot is a dolly out that shows David at the bottom of the swimming pool and gradually moves upward, until he is a small and motionless body in the middle of the water. Thanks to the immersion in the water of the point-of-view structure that shows the observing subject and the 'subjectified' (altered) observed object, the spectator experiences both the character's inner state and his or her own state, his or her bodily position in the psychological space of the film experience. This point-of-view dynamic makes the spectator aware of two things: (s)he sees the world from a new, underwater and *enwatered* point-of-view, and (s)he sees the place and the body that (s)he occupied before. As Vivian Sobchack would argue in the wake of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of *reversibility* (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139), the spectator is both a *seeing* and *seen* subject (Sobchack 1992, 103–104), involved in both the act of perceiving and the act of perceiving his or her perceiving. More than mere physiological reflex responses to sensorial stimuli, and far from being a metaphor of the screen as a Narcissistic mirror, cinema uses watery modes of expression and encourages watery modes of perception, with the effect of revealing its inherent *reflexive* nature.

In brief, *enwaterment* is a process of constructing and organising water-based film experience, which aims to merge the tendency of film to express sensoriality and the spectators' tendency to feel the sense of film directly with their senses. The transparency of water evokes the act of seeing, streaming water suggests the motion of images, and the surface of water replicates the surface of the screen. Many stylistic and formal modes of representation – e.g. cross-fade, slow motion, split screen and flashback – are typically 'aquatic,' since they involve the visual and aural concretisation of the dynamic properties of water. The fluid's movement accelerates or decelerates bodily motion, aquatic photography makes the characters' bodies 'dense' or 'diluted,' while underwater sounds and 'awash' shots produce a liquid film style that calls for a liquid spectatorship. Haptic perception is enhanced by immersion, physiological reactions are stimulated by the representation of drowning bodies, and the characters evolve through narrative points that are imbued with water. This is as true in the water as out of it: this *enwaterment* is not merely a way of experiencing the film in which water is a subject or a setting, but it is also a general attitude of the spectator, who, at least in the most effective cases, comprehends and internalises even the symbolic substance of film by experiencing it in a bodily, immediate, empathetic and reflexive form.

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**Figure 2.** Drowning and immersive scenes in contemporary cinema: *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007), *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005), *What Lies Beneath* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000), *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), *Sphere* (Barry Levinson, 1998), *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2004), *The Sea Inside* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2004).



Figure 3. *A. I. – Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001).



**Figure 4.** Fluid camera movement in *A. I. – Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001).



**Figure 5.** *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004).



**Figures 6–7.** Hallucinations and nightmares in *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004).



