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## RELATING THROUGH THE COAST – POETIC DOCUMENTARY FILM AND ARCHIPELAGIC THINKING

*Relaciones a través de la costa. - Película documental poética y  
pensamiento archipelágico*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article looks to the coast as a crucial site to consider environmental issues through visual media. I argue that the meeting point of water and land is an evocative site for meaning making in documentary film. By looking to modern documentaries representing the coast, I recognise the importance of style and aesthetics in communicating world views through audio-visual forms. Veering away from more traditional approaches to film analysis, I pursue place-based theory and put forward Édouard Glissant’s “archipelagic thinking” as a framework for analysis. The archipelago, a group of islands connected by the ocean, becomes a metaphor for world formation and formal analysis is approached through the lens of oceanic relation. Local depictions are favoured to provide intimate views and understandings of coastal issues. I argue that by framing the local coast, we can extend to views of translocalism. When considering overwhelming global processes related to the environment and climate crisis, translocalism aids the comprehension of complex global processes.

**KEYWORDS:** Documentary Film, Archipelagic Thinking, Coasts, Film Studies, Environmental Humanities, Blue Humanities, Translocal, Decolonial Method.



**RESUMEN:** Este artículo mira a la costa como un sitio crucial para considerar cuestiones ambientales a través de medios visuales. Sostiene que el punto de encuentro del agua y la tierra es un lugar evocador para la creación de significado en el cine documental. Al ver documentales modernos que representan la costa, reconocemos la importancia del estilo y la estética a la hora de comunicar visiones del mundo a través de formas audiovisuales. Alejándonos de enfoques más tradicionales del análisis cinematográfico, se sigue la teoría basada en el lugar y propone el “pensamiento archipelágico” de Édouard Glissant como marco para el análisis. El archipiélago, un grupo de islas conectadas por el océano, se convierte en una metáfora de la formación del mundo y el análisis formal se aborda a través de la lente de la relación oceánica. Se prefieren las representaciones locales para proporcionar puntos de vista íntimos y una comprensión de los problemas costeros. Sostenemos que al enmarcar la costa local, podemos extendernos a visiones de translocalismo. Al considerar procesos globales abrumadores relacionados con el medio ambiente y la crisis climática, el translocalismo ayuda a comprender procesos globales complejos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Cine Documental, Pensamiento Archipelágico, Costas, Estudios Cinematográficos, Humanidades Ambientales, Humanidades Azules, Translocal, Métodos Decoloniales

**RESUM:** Aquest article mira a la costa com un lloc crucial per a considerar qüestions ambientals a través de mitjans visuals. Sosté que el punt de trobada de l'aigua i la terra és un lloc evocador per a la creació de significat al cinema documental. En veure documentals moderns que representen la costa, reconeixem la importància de l'estil i l'estètica a l'hora de comunicar visions del món a través de formes audiovisuals. Allunyant-nos d'enfocaments més tradicionals de l'anàlisi cinematogràfica, se segueix la teoria basada en el lloc i proposa el “pensament arxipelàgic” d'Édouard Glissant com a marc per a l'anàlisi. L'arxipèlag, un grup d'illes connectades per l'oceà, es converteix en una metàfora de la formació del món i l'anàlisi formal s'aborda a través de la lent de la relació oceànica. Es prefereixen les representacions locals per a proporcionar punts de vista íntims i una comprensió dels problemes costaners. Sostenim que en emmarcar la costa local, podem estendre'ns a visions de translocalisme. En considerar processos globals aclaparadors relacionats amb el medi ambient i la crisi climàtica, el translocalisme ajuda a comprendre processos globals complexos.



**PARAULES CLAU:** Cinema Documental, Pensament Arxipelàgic, Costas, Estudis Cinematogràfics, Humanitats Ambientals, Humanitats Blaves, Translocal, Mètodes Decoloniales.

## 1. Archipelagic Thinking as Methodology

The French film academic, Jean Mottet, when speaking of landscape and the sea on the film-screen remarked: “the sea encourages a rupture with ordinary experience in favour of a more spiritual quest” (quoted in Lefebvre 2006, xix). Investigating how documentary envisages this rupture is an important consideration in this article. As we face the reality of human induced ecological collapse and land masses erode due to rising sea levels, our sense of time on land in turn erodes. With temporal and spatial scales in mind, how can we represent relationships to the environment on-screen? And what does this emotional “rupture” when viewing the sea hold and give way to? Mottet signals a re-calibration of our gaze or altered ways of seeing that differ from quotidian experience. Pursuing this emphasis on the sea’s capacity to emotionally engage us, I explore conceptual and material views of the coast as a place which encourages contemplation on our relationship to the environment and with each other. In this paper, I argue for the importance of “archipelagic thinking” and its application to documentary film studies. I will explain how archipelagic thinking can encourage analyses between geographically distinct films and I focus on formal style and aesthetics as an important form of communication for social and political messages in documentary film. In this article, I will analyse two poetic documentary case studies that look to the lives of coastal communities to better understand how thinking through the sea might help us envisage the interconnections and differences between culture and the environment. The two case studies which will be analysed are *mañi - towards the ocean, towards the shore* by Sky Hopinka (2020) - a documentary film based in the Pacific Northwest region of Oregon, USA and *Iorram (Boat Song)* by Alastair Cole (2021) - a film in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland.

The theoretical application of the archipelago encourages a model that nourishes visions of dynamic relation between multiple parts. Archipelagic thought was born from Caribbean critique and is marked by the spatial resonances of the area. The term was proposed by the Martinique / French writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant. Glissant’s work spans across fiction, nonfiction and poetry and he has made major contributions to contemporary decolonial thought. Glissant earned his PhD in Ethnography at the Sorbonne in Paris and upon returning to Martinique in the mid-sixties, he began writing about “relational poetics”. *Poetics of Relation* (1990 ed. 1997) is considered the most comprehensive of his books and develops both a material and conceptual view of relation to better understand how knowledge is shared and expressed across cultures. By looking



to the archipelago as a group of islands which are interrelated, we can approach the dissemination of ideas in both a literal and figurative sense. The ocean acts as a passageway between archipelagic masses and we can use the archipelago as a synecdoche for larger scales of world formation. Global scales can be cognitively distancing as we struggle to comprehend the complex webs of social and environmental forces at this scale. The archipelago thus provides fruitful as place-based theory to creatively explore shared and distinct experiences of life on Earth.

Sparse work has been undertaken which applies archipelagic thinking as a methodology in film studies, however, increasing attention is being paid here. Phillippa Lovatt's article "The Acoustics of the Archipelagic Imagination in Southeast Asian Artists' Film" (2021) understands the multiplicitous quality of sound through archipelagic thinking to explore sound art and its political meaning in film. Research within the academy has tended to use archipelagic thinking as a method to analyse films from a single geographical region (Zahlten 2018; DeGuzman 2019; Merchant 2022). Choosing smaller and more intimate decolonial methodologies such as archipelagic thinking helps re-frame our gaze, challenging global visions preoccupied with colonial scales that aim to "conquer" - this is the strive to think of relation as the sum of vast multiple parts, not a homogenising imperial whole. I put forward that archipelagic thinking need not be applied strictly to the archipelago. If we are to think on a multiscale level, the defining difference between islands and continents is their size. Using archipelagic thinking with continental case studies is a political act to reframe our ways of seeing. Looking to the continental mass, archipelagic thinking shifts the conceptualisation of space from a linear, vast expanse of coast and land, towards one of multidirectional flows.

Glissant, influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1988), adopted the metaphor of the rhizome to describe the process of creolization, or in other words, the swapping and merging of cultures. The rhizome, Glissant believes, is less dangerous than subscribing to the belief of being rooted to place. As opposed to a root, a rhizome can be understood in terms of multiplicity and through networks which are non-linear. Glissant associated the idea of roots attached to a space with territorial attitudes that arise in fascism. Glissant writes of his understanding of the rhizome in *Poetics of Relation* saying:

"Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other"

(Glissant 1990 ed. 1997, 11)



To Glissant, the rhizome and the archipelago are privy to a style of thinking which, if we pay attention to, will lead us towards a better understanding of what it means to belong in the world and consider our relations to material, ecological and social issues. It is necessary in each film, to acknowledge that space and cultural setting influence each film in unique and incomparable ways. This openness to relation should not be a strive to capture and envisage the total sum of earthly relations, rather it aims to be sensitive towards complexity, and to recognise and acknowledge what is presented to us. In acknowledging opacity, this analytical approach will not attempt to define relationships to the coast, but rather analyse artistic representations to help understand how we can convey complex feelings at the meeting point of water and land. In this way, poetics is stressed as a mode which allows opaqueness to sit side by side relation.

## 2. Poetic Documentary Film and the Coast

Scholarship in documentary film studies has largely focused on the formalist categorisation of documentary films in order to provide solid definitions. One of the most influential theorists to categorise and define documentary style is Bill Nichols (1991 ed. 2017). His six modes of documentary are still widely taught in film schools and aim to demonstrate a range of documentary genres attached to their historical zeitgeist. Although these modes are useful and I will refer to them in identifying stylistic trends, they do not form my core methodology which approaches genre and style in a more dynamic way. I also do not wish to embark on a discussion related to what a documentary is and what it isn't, there is a wealth of scholarship in this area which is helpful to consolidate but not necessary to outline here (Minh-Ha 1990; Eitzen 1995; Plantinga 2005). My approach to documentary aligns with Ilona Hongisto's opening words of her book *Soul of Documentary* (2015):

“Documentaries depict individual lives, political events, and social hierarchies that keep acting and transforming in myriad connections even after films come to an end. In documentary cinema ‘the end’ is merely a threshold”.

(Hongisto 2015, 11)

I should add that they also depict landscapes, plants, animals and elemental processes which also “act and transform” after they are captured on film. This approach takes on a scalar, archipelagic view of documentary, of ever-changing connections where a documentary is a creative snapshot in time. Małni and Iorram will be conceptually understood as islands, whereby each film is at once distinct, yet related by various shared themes and styles. In truth, the above quote could be applied to many other artforms, and this is where the problem of definitive views of documentary lies. A documentary is a documentary in large part because of the filmmaker's intention to make one.



This paper focuses on the poetic documentary as a valuable form which communicates the limits of the medium whilst encouraging the dissemination of thought and feeling. Nichols defines the poetic mode as a style of experimentation. He writes that the poetic mode highlights the filmmaker's subjectivities in giving "fragments" of the "historical world" through aesthetic form (Nichols 2017, 121). Much like the archipelago, these "fragments" can be thought of as interrelated and the process of watching and analysing film should be to seek intra/intertextual connection. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle's conception of poetics in 335 BCE stipulated that poetics is a form of mimesis whereby life is imitated through art (Halliwell 1998). Mimesis is an interesting contradiction to the strive for capturing reality in documentary, the poetic documentary betrays a reflexive awareness that what is presented should not be surrendered to as truth but should be trusted as informed by true events.

*Małni* and *Iorram* serve as the encouragement of relation and pay attention to stories of small coastal communities which stand apart from surrounding homogenous culture. *Małni* focuses on the indigenous Chinook people of the Pacific Northwest of the USA and *Iorram* focuses on the people of the Outer Hebrides in Scotland. Both groups are seen as independent to the dominant cultures of the UK and USA and the tension between native identity and Western identity is explored. The question of what we consider to be an indigenous story is of importance when analysing the two films. *Małni* can be described as an explicitly indigenous film and being of indigenous Luiseño descent, *Hopinka* focusses on what the indigenous identity means today, to explore, as he says: "[the] many ways to look at where belonging and its tensions come from [and] what these places represent" (quoted in Cronk 2020). *Iorram*, set in the Outer Hebrides, does not claim to engage with indigenous stories. The UK identifies less with the idea of the indigenous and the term has been associated with a right-wing sentiment to "push forward the anti-immigration agenda" (Mackay and Stirrup 2010). The Hebrides, known in Gaelic as "Innse Gall", translates to "isles of the strangers", referencing Norse settlers who arrived in the 9th century and occupied the Outer Hebrides for over two hundred years (Carmichael 1914). Despite this name, the people of the Hebrides have been described as native due to their long-standing ancestral ties to the islands (Mackenzie 2001).

*Małni*, released in 2020, is *Hopinka*'s first feature-length film. *Hopinka* learnt Chinook Wawa whilst studying in Portland in the Pacific Northwest and *małni* focuses on the lives of two Chinook people of the region. Jordan Mercier and Sweetwater Sahme are the film's protagonists and we encounter them in their familiar spaces, in nature and at home. Jordan is the father of two young children and we hear his thoughts on raising them to carry forward their Chinook heritage during a time of uncertainty. Sweetwater is pregnant and in the process of welcoming new life as well as grieving the loss of her grandmother who recently passed away. The documentary includes the origin-of-death Chinook myth which



is told in voice-over, running parallel to Jordan and Sweetwater's experiences as parents and descendants of a native people. The origin-of-death myth is recounted as the story of Lilu, a wolf, and T'alap'as, a coyote, who each lose a child and debate whether there is an afterlife. The Chinook identity is inextricably linked to their homeland of the American Northwest and Chinook myths are tied to the environmental surroundings of forest and ocean.

*Iorram* is an archival documentary which tells an oral history of the Outer Hebrides by editing together audio recordings of Hebridean locals from the 1940's to the 1960's. The film is the first to be spoken entirely in Gaelic and the documentary puts emphasis on exploring folklore through oral storytelling and song. *Iorram* is inspired by the academic research of the film's co-producer, Magnus Course who is an anthropologist at the University of Edinburgh where he studies the relationship between the Gaelic language and fishing communities (2021). Providing visual material to accompany the archival audio clips, we see contemporary quotidian life around the islands with fishermen, factory workers and locals alongside the dramatically beautiful yet bleak West coast of Scotland. The mythical spirits mentioned include: water horses, fairies, elves and mermaids and the dangers of the Hebridean seas are told through spiritual tales where magical creatures seem to appear at dark, hopeless moments.

Difficult histories of the islands are also mentioned, with mass evictions known as "the Clearances" marking the Outer Hebrides as a traumatic scar of forced dislocation. The Clearances took place over a period from the 1760's to the 1860's when landlords violently evicted locals in the highlands and islands (Gàidhealtachd) to claim land for agriculture and sheep farming (Devine 1989). Iain Mackinnon (2017) has written on the relationship between colonialism and the clearances and notes that at this time, the people of the islands were seen as indigenous and culturally distinct. Disdain for this style of rural life, away from industrialisation has been put forward as a putative cause for cruel and forceful evictions undertaken by wealthy landowners. Withal, this external violence has not crumbled the identity of the Western Isles and the Outer Hebrides maintains a strong relationship to the Gaelic language, with the area containing the highest proportion of Gaelic speakers in Scotland (Nance et al 2016).





### 3. The Ocean, Opacity and Documentary Form

Glissant's notion of relationality is elucidated from the Caribbean archipelago and in turn put into a global context or, as he writes, "tout-monde". The post-colonial literary scholar, Chris Bongie (1999) notes that in Glissant's work, the Caribbean functions as a "site for understanding the complex new relations that ambivalently and chaotically join together all the hitherto unconnected parts of the world." This understanding of the "universal" must make space for opacity, identifying that homogenising cultures have contributed to cultural erasure in order to exist - pursuing the misguided strive for transparency. Fascism presents itself as the untapped fear of the unknown, obliterating complexity and alternative experience. This acute awareness of the "whole" forms one of the fundamental bases of archipelagic thinking.

I would like to pursue this association with the whole as a mindfulness of a totality that cannot reveal itself, yet informs us through the parts we know, will come to know, will forget and will never know. In other words, how do we live productively with the known alongside the unknown? Must it present itself as Herman Melville wrote in *Moby Dick* of the ocean's ungraspable horizon as "the horrors of the half-known life" (Melville 1851 ed. 2002, 321)? In this analogy of land and sea, the ocean becomes something to fearfully fixate on – what might arrive from it, or what might leave to it? Here, great blue expanses speak of otherness. We individually encounter opacity in different forms, what is obscured to one may be clear to another and a poetic style can make space for a range of speculative readings. When considering debates related to capturing "the real" and how documentaries might not hold strength in claiming truth (Williams 1998; Geiger 2011; Nichols 2012), the focus on subjective experience and collective myth in *małni* and *Iorram* does not insinuate that the documentary creates objective, indexical accounts. The poetic, observational styles veer away from the fight for truth and instead, intimate forms of storytelling are privileged as a form of truth, without claims to be the whole of it. Approaching documentary through opacity and poetics may help abate the panic surrounding post-truth culture, these styles avert the need for definitive beliefs and instead guide the content to be placed within our own unique experiences.

*Małni* uses an observational approach where tracking shots follow the documentary subjects, with the unsteady camera movement often losing focus. The desire for the unmediated unfolding of events is signalled by the privileging of unplanned movement and the camera acts as a bystander, recording reactions to moments as they unfold. Hopinka has spoken of his avoidance of heavy post-production to allow for associative meaning (Anthony 2021), however, *małni* does not hold the traditional panoptic and "objective" observational gaze and in reviews, it has been compared to the genre of the essay film (Gadre 2021). This is perhaps due to its introspective and searching poetic tone, but the-



re is no pre-planned essayistic journey. Despite the claim that post-production is not a major concern of Hopinka's, the film demonstrates clear technique in communicating through opacity by using a poetic style. The opening sequence sets this tone and I will analyse formal technique to provide examples of opacity as aesthetics.

The film opens with an ambient, synthesizer soundtrack composed by sound artist Thad Kellstadt and the sea with its waves rolling, framed to fill the screen. We then see handheld footage in a forest, where Jordan walks forward in a tracking shot from behind, following a tree-lined path. The shot changes to a silhouette of Sweetwater at dusk, where from a low-lit room, we see her silhouette walk into shot and approach a balcony towards the sea, then she looks out to the horizon. The camera carefully frames the light and shadows in the room. However, this attention to cinematography and light is at once disrupted as Sweetwater turns around and we move past her with jagged movements as the image blurs (Figure 1). We proceed to the sea and it is captured in full frame, with the sunset approaching the dark. On the beach, a small silhouette of a child walking and playing in the waves appears from the bottom right of the screen, followed by what we assume to be the child's parents. The title screen then proceeds with a background of cosmic, red whisp-like shapes. The ambient sound is disrupted and a deep reverb is added, bringing the red forms and dissonant hums together to create a dark, empyrean scene.

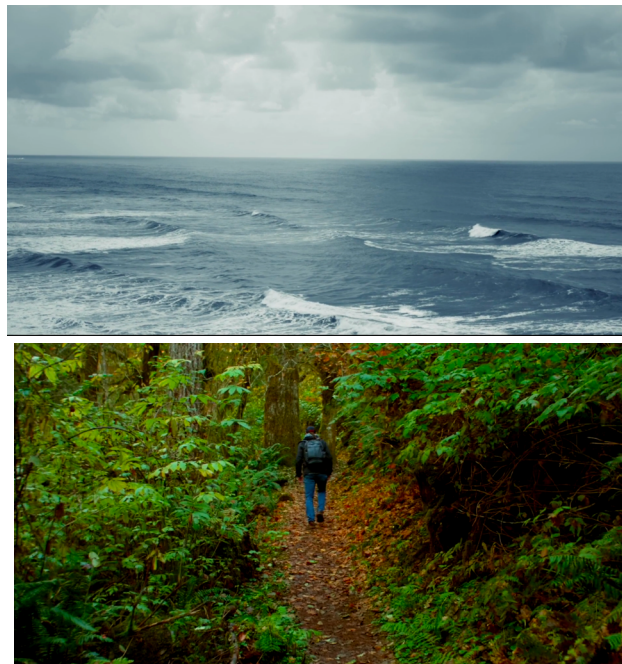




Figure. 1 *Małni – Towards the Ocean, Towards the Shore* (Hopinka, 2020)

The form unravels by allowing Sweetwater and Jordan to approach their stories with open-ended possibilities. This creates space to explore how environmental surroundings can guide them to understand how their indigenous identity plays a role in facing challenges ahead. The colour grading favours warm tones and the sun's rays dictates what we can see, occasionally losing focus and re-focussing. The sun's spectral haze evokes the spirits we've been introduced to, belonging to an obscured yet vivid, meditative and oneiric world. The frequent blurs of the camera as well as the unknown shapes in the title screen can be understood as what media scholar Laura U. Marks (2000) would call a haptic image. A haptic image does not have a clear form and provides texture rather than signification. Haptic images elicit affective, embodied responses and bypass cognitive meaning to provide a material and sensual visual experience. The focus on bodily viewing engages the viewer through their senses and diverts the need to gather knowledge through language and image, instead demonstrating that relating can be accessed through different styles of visual engagement. The haptic images in the introduction to *małni* combine with the ambient music to create a tonal mood whereby the images and sounds on screen do not overpower one another. In Robert Strachan and Marian Leonard's article (2014) on nonfiction and ambient sounds, they note that ambient music which shifts in volume and is accompanied by diegetic environmental sound encourages a discerning ear and the viewer listens aesthetically. *Małni* employs this strategy and gives weighting to both sound and image in providing affective experience and thus engages our senses through different registers.

This short and experimental opening montage connects the central motifs of the film: the ocean, environment and human experience. By cutting together individuals interacting to the ocean and environment from a distance, Hopinka signals that the camera is a spectator and despite its power to capture, it does not dominate or engineer the subjects on-screen. Through the blurs and haptic images, we do not focus on meaning and instead become more attentive to the feeling of these aesthetics, we are presented with opacity yet encouraged to commence on an amorphous journey. Once this introductory tone has been set, the first words are spoken and presented as non-diegetic questions in Chinook Wawa. We see and hear water with underwater seaweed moving amongst the currents of water (Figure 2) whilst the narrator slowly poses the questions:

“Where are we going now? Maybe we’re going to the ocean? Maybe we’re going upriver? Maybe we’re going downriver? Maybe we’re going towards the ocean?”



Figure. 2 Małni – Towards the Ocean, Towards the Shore (Hopinka, 2020)

The questions cease and the same voice asserts:

“Where the people are. Where the people go when they’re gone. Where the people go when they’ve died.”

This voice appears throughout the film and acts as a sort of “spirit guide”. Loo-



king to Bill Nichols' popular writing on documentary style, his article "The Voice of Documentary" (1983), describes the well-known "voice of God" narrator, Nichols says of the style – "it employed a supposedly authoritative yet often presumptuous off-screen narration." When choosing an off-screen voice, Hopinka avoids definitive statements and this narrator mythologises and muses, helping to place the contemporary stories we see within the Chinookan tradition. This introductory speech marks us by approaching the film as a journey, through the "where?" we avoid direct answers and are inquisitive, not reaching for a terminus and the uncertainty provides a basis for relaxing into a style of poetic opaqueness.

In *Poetics of Relation* (1990 ed. 1997), in the chapter "For Opacity", Glissant challenges the Western strive for transparency which is structured on achieving understanding through value-based judgements that are influenced by domineering existing models. Glissant describes how the right to opacity does not signal that irreducible parts are relegated to a solitary existence, rather he says:

"Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. [...] give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures."

(Glissant 1990 ed. 1997, 190)

This attention to texture signals what a type of poetics of opacity might entail, and how aesthetic analysis could develop based on a recalibration of how we might look at art objects. Despite not being directly influenced by Glissant, Marks' aforementioned work on haptic visuality (2000) provides a good example of this focus on surface, "weave" and "texture". Marks explains phenomenological, visual experiences and links their aesthetics to a style of decolonial visuality. Marks approaches film embodiment through postcolonial theory and argues that the bodily and physical experiences of place are central to films related to belonging, identity and diaspora. She describes haptic aesthetics as informed by silences where historical records have been neglected and they elicit sensual, affective responses rather than providing images for intentional narrative purpose.

In the analysis of this beginning sequence, *małni* displays moments where shadows, the seas waves and tracking shots divert us from concentrating on narrative through image and instead we feel experience through obscured visual forms and surfaces. In this underwater shot, the seaweed and waves bring a strong sense of liquid materiality. Melody Jue, in her book, *Wild Blue Media* (2020) argues for the placement of thought from within the water column, stating that a "conceptual displacement is rigorously self-reflexive" (7). What Jue is signa-



ling is that the underwater gaze opens new ways of seeing. The ocean's lack of grounding and solidity leads us to reimagine movement and sensing. Jue argues for conceptual displacement to better understand pressing issues such as sea level rise and the collapse of fishes and sustainable fishing communities.

What the haptic imagery and underwater shots obfuscate is a sense of scale and clarity. When looking to the practice of ethnography, Glissant, in *Poetics of Relation* seeks to disrupt hierarchical modes of discourse and criticises scales, writing that from the perspective of dominant, Western thought: "I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. [...] accepting differences does, of course, upset the hierarchy of this scale." (1990 ed. 1997, 190). *Małni* and *Iorram* avoid hierarchical scales and edit stories together without context to avoid a predictable, continuous structure. Timelines and details are left unknown and the guiding value is placed on affect and the emotional resonances of the personal stories told.

Like *małni*, *Iorram* also includes underwater footage in its opening scene. It is interesting that Jue points to the environmental "slow violence" of the decline of fishes as a cause for the need for aquatic ways of thinking. *Iorram* is a film about fishing communities and opens with a passage of poetic verse in Gaelic, accompanied by underwater footage of jellyfish. We hear:

"Again and again when I am broken,  
my thought comes on you when you were young,  
and the incomprehensible ocean fills with floodtide and a thousand sails.  
The shore of trouble is hidden with its reefs and the wrack of grief,  
and the unbreaking wave strikes about my feet with a silken rubbing."

The camera pans upwards to follow one jellyfish which moves towards the surface where strong rays of light break through the water. The shot then changes and we are positioned from the beach, looking outwards to the blue horizon and boats by the shore. We move from being submerged to the familiar perspective of the horizon (Figure 3). To explore this visual displacement further, Margaret Cohen, in her essay *Seeing Through Water* (2016, 215) quotes Philippe Diolé who was a member of the French Navy with famous oceanographer and filmmaker Jacques Costeau in the 1940's. Speaking of the experience of scuba diving, Diolé writes: "how can life be organised in a world without horizon?". It is the interplay between structure and the dislocation of structure which is demonstrated in *Iorram* and this montage from the "unfamiliar" underwater, to the horizon communicates the depths and opacities of life alongside the familiar environment we structure ourselves around.





Figure. 3 *Iorram (Boat Song)* (Cole, 2021)

The introductory poetic verse comments on memory and feeling through the environmental surroundings of the ocean and coast. The process of recalling memories is described as a form of grief and the mystery of underwater life resonates with the difficulties of recalling the past as something which is distant to our life now. Margaret Cohen in her essay *The Shipwreck as Undersea Gothic* (2018) describes the presence of jellyfish and silver schools of fish around shipwrecks as providing the dead with an afterlife. No such material shipwreck is found here, but the audio provides a form of verbal shipwreck and the jellyfish become the ghostly presence of these voices. This verse describes the experience of the ocean as a feeling of overwhelming yearning, a place to face that which has been lost. In both *małni* and *Iorram*, these openings use footage of underwater life - seaweed and jellyfish that have little agency over movement. What these early scenes are priming us to is that we are shaped by time and its movements, like the waves, currents and tide shaping the seaweed and jellyfish. Marks identifies haptic aesthetics as a response to historical silence and *Iorram* is a documentary aimed at overcoming historical omissions through preservation and archival exhibition. I would like to move beyond the haptic image and analyse other stylistic approaches used in *Iorram* to communicate opacity or unknown silences. I argue that opacity is communicated through the temporal and narrative disjuncture between archival sound and image.



Prior to making the film, Cole recognised that visual material is generally the focal source in archival documentaries and that structuring a documentary through sound could provide new ways to understand past subjects. He says: “If cinema has historically prioritised vision over sound, this is a chance to readdress the balance, and provide audiences with a new and deeply satisfying kind of cinematic experience” (Cole 2021). This is a sweeping statement and there are a number of filmmakers who have explored sound archive as central to documentary form. Olivia Landry’s recent book *A Decolonizing Ear* (2022) makes good headway in exploring the disruptive possibilities of destabilizing colonial, ethnographic audio field recordings and she analyses documentary films from the late 20th and early 21st century which repurpose sound archives, aiming to challenge their extractivist origins. The fieldwork recordings used in *Iorram* do not pose such clear ethical issues as the examples Landry uses. This is in large part due to Scottish researchers who had close connections to the Outer Hebrides undertaking the fieldwork and the material is still housed in Scotland - at the School of Scottish Studies Archives at the University of Edinburgh.

Considering the contemporary footage which accompanies the audio, apart from being related geographically, what we see is loosely connected to the stories we hear. Throughout the documentary, shots change at a frequent pace and alongside landscapes, we see fishermen, boats, factories, houses and a range of island environments. At times, Cole opts for a sort of cohesion in meaning between visuals and oral storytelling, during other moments, the sea and landscape serve an extra-narrative function. The landscape is a major actor throughout the documentary and provides an important function in creating the film’s atmosphere, whereby silence and opaqueness is conveyed. Martin Lefebvre, in his introduction to the anthology, *Landscape and Film* (2007) looks to Sergei Eisenstein’s theory of landscape as conveying a “plastic interpretation of emotions” (xii). Lefebvre pursues Eisenstein’s understanding of landscape as functioning as more than just back-drop, providing fundamental emotional value to film worlds. The word landscape, Lefebvre writes, stems from the Renaissance period when the Western understanding of space shifts focus from “setting” which serves for narrative to “landscape” as an autonomous spectacle. The colonial conquest of space during this time can explain this preoccupation with landscape in painting. The word landscape also forgets the ocean and my use of it is critical due to this omission. However, it is difficult to find a better suited word to consider the artistic representation of environmental surroundings. When looking at *Iorram*’s visual approach – the landscape’s framing is important to analyse as an aesthetic device that shapes the past and present as separate yet related.



Early in the film, in one such landscape scene, a Hebridean recalls the view when standing on a hill on May 1st. He says around this time that boats would line up all along the harbour “round Cape Wrath, through the Minch, going to Barra”. This marked the start of the fishing season where the boats would be out from mid-May to September and it is made clear that there were few breaks for fishermen who kept occupied with different seasonal catches. The landscape shot (Figure 4). which we see on-screen is from a hill. The skies are overcast and the camera looks over an area by the coast where a small cluster of houses are surrounded by uninhabited grassland and mountains. There are no boats to be seen and we imagine the lively past we hear overlayed on the silent modern images. The landscape shot then changes to a few boats at a harbour but the numbers do not match up to the story we are told from years ago. We are not explicitly told of the decline of the fishing trade in recent years, but through rendering the landscape as quiet and still, we come closer to understanding the tensions and mismatches of the past to the present and the unspoken insinuations of worries related to fading culture and practices.

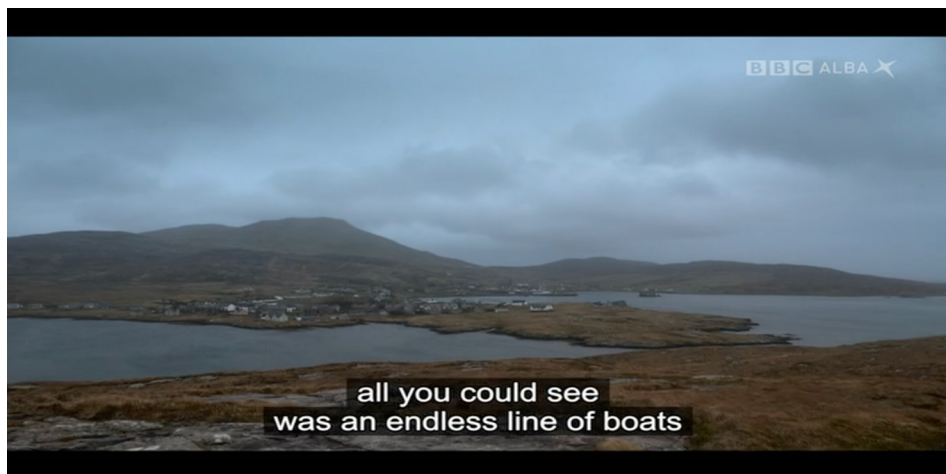


Figure. 4 *Iorram (Boat Song)* (Cole, 2021)

The contrast between the date of the audio clips and the modern footage in *Iorram* creates an opaque presence which cannot be placed in time. Anu Koivunen has identified this feeling in her paper “Affective Historiography: Archival Aesthetics and the Temporalities of Televisual Nation-Building” (2016) where she discusses the double temporality of utilising archive that gives way to “a transhistorical, even mythical notion of the nation as a community of feeling across time”. Although Koivunen is discussing visual archives, this quote succinctly communicates *Iorram*’s approach to archive. This “mythical notion of the nation” is evoked in *Iorram* as it focuses on places and times that feel as though they could easily have been “lost”. By using largely untouched recordings, their faded quality brings forward thoughts related to the strength and fragility of culture, the voices we hear are vivacious yet they are kept alive only



by replaying these recordings. We could call the documentary a form of “anarchival” practice. The term “anarchive” has been used to express archives as living entities which are used for dynamic production processes, rather than show and tell repositories of the past (Colmenares et al 2019). Iorram encourages the continued existence of the past whilst recognising the process of degradation. In renewing interest in the myths and stories of the islands, these tales bear new and important meaning for the Outer Hebrides today.

#### 4. Conclusion

Despite being from different areas of the world, małni and Iorram share themes related to ancestry, native language, spiritual experience and myth. In each film, the ocean is central as a space where birth, life, death and culture are explored. Édouard Glissant’s work provides a rich framework where, looking to the model of the archipelago, the ocean is considered as a site for relationality and I have argued here for the use of archipelagic thinking as a mode to analyse documentary films from a decolonial perspective. The aesthetic and stylistic approaches of the two documentaries can be elucidated through Glissant’s concepts related to “the right to opacity” which challenge the strive for transparency as a form of knowledge seeking. Opacity is explored through the poetic styles of the documentaries. In małni, the camera’s frequent blurs and signal an attention to texture as an approach to aesthetics which veers away from the strive for “objective” representation. The underwater sequences in both films displace our spatial assumptions and urge alternative ways of seeing. In Iorram, the temporal experimentations with sound archive and modern footage lead to the recognition of obscured yet connected pasts and presents, as well as unknown futures yet to come.

By looking to archipelagic thinking as a methodology in analysing these documentaries, we are better placed to communicate the interrelatedness of nature and humans. This poses the potential for translocal communication, which stems from smaller poetic stories towards ones which resemble semblances of truth for us all.



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