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2021-12-13

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17280>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kooijman, Jaap; Pisters, Patricia: Murky Waters: Submerging in an aesthetics of non-transparency.
In: *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies*. #Futures, Jg. 10 (2021-12-13), Nr. 2, S. 121–126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17280>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://necsus-ejms.org/murky-waters-submerging-in-an-aesthetics-of-non-transparency/>

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Murky Waters: Submerging in an aesthetics of non-transparency

Jaap Kooijman & Patricia Pisters

NECSUS 10 (2), Autumn 2021: 121–126

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‘Transparency no longer seems like the bottom of the mirror in which Western humanity reflected the world in its own image. There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today, denied or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing.’[1]



Languid middle-aged white bodies dragging chairs over a terrace, a glass of wine or whiskey in hand, the camera framed at well-to-do bellies in close-up; on the soundtrack the scraping noise of chairs on concrete, eerily reinforced by the loud sounds of cooling ice cubes in the half empty glasses. Some mo-

ments later, the opening sequence of Lucretia Martel's *La Cienaga* (2001) reveals a swimming pool at the backdrop of these lethargically moving bodies. The weather is hot and humid, cloudy and suffocating. The water of the swimming pool, however, does not promise the usual crystal-clear refreshing dive into transparent blueness that washes away all lingering sorrow, hidden feelings, or repressed events. Its water is milky greenish, it is murky and opaque. It is this scene of murky waters in a swimming pool that formed the starting point of our audiovisual essay.

For the tenth anniversary edition of NECSUS, we propose an engagement with the concepts of opacity and transparency that we feel has been undervalued in the field of media studies. Introduced by the Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant in his book *Poetics of Relation* (1997, originally published as *Poétique de la relation* in 1990), Glissant's theorisation of opacity as an 'unknowability' has been picked up in postcolonial studies and is sometimes transferred to political thought, art criticism, queer theory, and media studies, as demonstrated in a special issue of *Camera Obscura* (2016) in which opacity is brought in as a tactic to evade surveillance cameras and is related to strategies of camouflage and invisibility. The renowned Flaherty Seminar took 'opacity' as its guiding concept in 2021, thus the concept seems to be gaining importance in film and media studies, and we hope that Glissant's work will grow in importance in the years to come. In our audiovisual essay we take opacity as a need to acknowledge the non-transparency and as a critical assessing and undoing of normative ('transparent') whiteness. We will return to this point shortly.

Let us first return to Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* where he demands 'the right to opacity' as a politics and poetics of resistance against the Western desire to make everything transparent, reducing the Other to a set of stereotypes. He explains:

'If we examine the process of "understanding" people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce.'^[2]

Glissant introduced opacity in the postcolonial context of Martinique, arguing for the right to hold complex subjectivities marked by various histories of migration, marked by the transatlantic slave trade and displacement. Against the dedication to clarity and pleasing rationality of the French language as a language of domination and 'universal humanism', Glissant poses

the productive poetics of opacity of creole languages that must be preserved in their ambiguities to claim difference and distinctiveness. By insisting on claiming space in non-reducible imagination, Glissant asserts that a poetics can be a ‘transformative mode in history’[3] because indirectly, ‘imagination changes mentalities, however slowly it may go about this’.[4] The ways in which Glissant proposes opacity (not ‘knowing’ the other, or even the self, completely) as a condition for a poetics of relation is a powerful concept to revise sectarian identity politics into more communal practices. But that is not what we are dealing with in our essay. Here we want to express in an audiovisual poetics the need to acknowledge the ‘murkiness’ of white normativity that hides so many forms of violence towards ‘the other’.

Most (though not all) of the films used in our audiovisual essay are by white directors from Hollywood and European cinema. The frequently-used and arguably clichéd trope of the swimming pool in Western cinema is often associated with whiteness (see Hawkman, Walker). In the audiovisual essay, we highlight this point by including not only iconic swimming pools scenes – such as the pastiche of Jacques Deray’s *La Piscine* (1969) in François Ozon’s *Swimming Pool* (2003) – but also the shot from Mati Diop’s *Atlantique* (2019) of the swimming pool adjacent to the sea, a shot which, in turn, is reminiscent of the swimming pool in Djibril Diop Mambéty’s *Touki Bouki* (1973; not featured in our audiovisual essay). As Édouard Brown and Pam Hirsch demonstrate in their volume on the cinema of the swimming pool, a swimming pool is a polyvalent image in itself. Very often it is associated with a Western perspective of the ‘transparent’ higher- or middle-class life that stands for the American Dream, as for instance in Baz Luhrmann’s *The Great Gatsby* (2013), or the rich and famous bourgeoisie that linger away the summertime at the Riviera, as in *La Piscine* and Luca Guadagnino’s remake of (and retake on) this film *A Bigger Splash* (2015). Sometimes swimming pools function as a tourist attraction for Austrian middle-aged women in pursuit of love and sex in Kenya (Ulrich Seidl’s *Paradies: Liebe* [2012]) and sometimes they are symbols of longing for another life (Chris Smith’s *The Pool* [2007]) or for global hyper capitalist success (*Atlantique*). However, rather than claiming ‘the right to opacity’, our essay wants to visualise the poetics and politics of the non-transparent, in rendering the transparency of the cool blue swimming pool water opaque by alluring to the violence that is hidden at the bottom of the pool, troubling the water, rendering it opaque indeed. It has to be noted that by taking this approach, we, as white European scholars, employ opacity as an aesthetic device of vision and sound that does not ‘clamor the right to opacity’

as does Glissant, but that instead evokes the need to make the transparent opaque in order to point to these hidden histories of violence.

We do this by rendering the iconic swimming pools of the first part of the essay opaque in blurring image and sound, exemplified by Lucretia Martel's non-transparent swimming pools that hide so many unprocessed traumas like the violence of the colonial and the more recent past of military junta's. The video's first part merges two famous swimming pool scenes from *La Piscine* and *The Great Gatsby*, featuring charismatic stars of Western cinema (Alain Delon, Romy Schneider, and Leonardo DiCaprio), intercut with swimming pool shots from other films. The video's second part consists of the swimming pool fight scene from *A Bigger Splash* (in the original film, the 'big splash' which is shown, while the 'bigger splash' of drowning migrants remains invisible), over which we have layered underwater scenes from other films, consisting of unequal fights and drowning in swimming pools. While in Western cinema, underwater scenes often suggest a dive into the subconscious, expressing desires and anxieties that lurk underneath the surface, by taking these scenes out of their original narratives and layering them over each other (both sonically and visually), the individual anxieties become non-transparent again, evoking instead many other bodies in the 'bigger pools' of the oceans.

One of these layers shows a dive in a swimming pool covered with leaves, a scene from Alfonso Cuarón's *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001), which is not just another road movie, but a film in which Mexico's history is 'bleeding between the lines', as Anthony Kao argues in his review of the film. The film animates a personal and intimate coming of age drama with an awareness of politics of the nation. In a similar way we are weaving (or waving) relations between the images of other films that directly or indirectly address these drowned questions related to power, abuse, and domination of different kinds. The two parts are connected by another scene from Lucretia Martel's *La Cienaga*, a young girl jumping into the swimming pool's murky water, only to leave her family waiting for her to emerge again – featured here in its almost full length of 17 excruciating seconds.

Ultimately, we attempt to interlace what Sudeep Dasgupta calls, 'an aesthetics of indirection' that diverts thinking from the temptation of polarities (between the colonial /postcolonial etc.). In his analysis of Guadagnino's *A Bigger Splash*, Dasgupta argues that the film 'constructs disturbing adjacencies whose intermittent presences block both the aesthetic contemplation of dis-

tant suffering and the engaged, almost pornographic involvement in the detailing of the other's plight.'[5] Where in *La Piscine* there is no outside of the swimming pool, in Guadagnino's revision of the swimming pool drama, we see 'scattered subalterns intermittently appear'[6] throughout the film. And as Dasgupta explains,

'it is crucial to understand the scattered subaltern not in isolation, but as a form of embodied subjectivity that is constantly adjacent to, imbricated with and relationally implicated with others, such as 'legal' subjects enjoying the rights of citizens (...) *A Bigger Splash* provides a disturbing cinematic experience of this relational understanding of the scattered subaltern with other, more privileged bodies and subjectivities'.[7]

With our audiovisual essay, we have attempted to destabilise the swimming pool and its mostly white bodies as a privileged space by rendering it less transparent, most prominently the underwater fight scene of *A Bigger Splash*. The audiovisual essay ends with a blurred shot of a wrecked boat that in the original film (unblurred) immediately follows this scene, signifying, as Dasgupta also points out, 'an absent presence'. With the end credits, we give a nod to Catherine Grant's audiovisual essay 'Sense of an Ending', adding one more layer of opaqueness, impenetrability, and polyvalence to the murky waters of Martel's swimming pools by overlaying the pool with the frightening powers of Mati Diop's rendering of the Atlantic.

Authors

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Notes

- [1] Glissant 1997, p. 111.
- [2] Glissant 1997, pp. 189-190.
- [3] Glissant 1997, p. xii.
- [4] Glissant 1997, p. 184.
- [5] Dasgupta 2017, p. 49.
- [6] Dasgupta 2017, p. 50.
- [7] Dasgupta 2017, p. 47.