



Performance Research

A Journal of the Performing Arts

ISSN: 1352-8165 (Print) 1469-9990 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprs20>

Animating Tangible Futures

Carl Lavery

To cite this article: Carl Lavery (2019) Animating Tangible Futures, Performance Research, 24:6, 29-37, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2019.1686591](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2019.1686591)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2019.1686591>



© 2019 The Author(s) Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 28 Nov 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Animating Tangible Futures

Returning (again) to Battleship Island

CARL LAVERY

No wonder! No wonder that our sophisticated civilisations, brimming with the accumulated knowledge of so many traditions, continue to flatten and dismember every part of the breathing earth.... For we have written all of these wisdoms down on the page, effectively divorcing these many teachings from the living land that once held and embodied these teachings. Once inscribed on the page, all this wisdom seemed to have an exclusively human provenance. David Abram (2010: 281)

As someone interested in the relationship between performance and the earth, I find myself simultaneously enthused and perturbed by this impassioned statement from the phenomenologist and anthropologist David Abram. Initially, Abram's plea for an animist way of re-engaging with knowledge appears to possess good ecological sense.¹ Through its critique of 'the deadness' of written language – what he goes on to describe as 'illumination ... set down in unchanging form' (281) – his comments call out for a new type of sensate thinking. This would be one in which thinkers

acknowledge, tap into and transmit what we may see as a 'non-human' energy, born from the heterogeneous folds and refrains that traverse the milieu in which they cannot help but participate.² To borrow from Isabelle Stengers, who is sympathetic to Abram's position, the knowledge gleaned from an affirmation of this energy allows for 'a reclamation of animism' (2012) – that is to say, an attunement to an autonomous world that exists beyond the narrow correlationism of Enlightenment philosophy and which does not, necessarily, entail a return to the type of primitivist, supernatural cosmos that Western anthropology has associated with animist practices from the nineteenth century onwards.³

Reclaiming animism does not mean, then, that we have ever been animist. Nobody has ever been animist because one is never 'animist in general', only in terms of assemblages that generate metamorphic transformation in our capacity to affect and be affected – and also to feel, think, and imagine. (2012)

¹ For more on the relationship between ecology, language and animism in Abram's work, see the chapters 'The Ecology of Magic' and 'Animism and the Alphabet' in *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world* (1996: 3–30, 93–136).

² It is interesting to note the parallels here with Walter Benjamin's Proustian take on thinking and feeling as experiences 'not located in the head', but as always bound up with the very place where they came into being (2009: 54).

³ While Stengers endorses Abram's position, she is also reluctant to share the entirety of his views on animism. She notes: 'In contrast to David Abram, whose experience enables him to turn the animist modes of experience, awareness, and knowledge into an intensely powerful bridge-making tool, as a generative constraint I must accept to not feel free to speak and speculate in a way that would situate others' (2012). Stengers' reserve stems from her scientific background and also from a desire not to 'categorize others' (2012).

⁴ As other contributors to this edition have explained, the term the 'new animism' comes from Graham Harvey (2005).



■ A wave over a ruin in Hashima. ©Lee Hassall

As Stengers implies with her endorsement of Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's notion of assemblage, reclaiming animism today has more to do with exposing oneself to the touch of some non-human outside than with a Western understanding (and possible appropriation) of indigenous knowledge systems. The point of the 'new animism', as Stengers never tires of repeating, is fundamentally transformative.⁴ The objective is not to determine whether a thought or belief is 'really' true or not, but in how that belief allows for more generative and intimate ways of being in the world. Quite simply, animism, for Stengers and also for Abram, is a pragmatic theory and practice of becoming animated, allowing oneself to be suffused with the breath of the world. Stengers insists:

Reclaiming means recovering what we have been separated from, but not in the sense that we can just get it back. Recovering means recovering from the very separation itself, regenerating what this separation has poisoned.... A poisoned milieu must be reclaimed, and so must many of our words, those that – like 'animism' and 'magic' – carry with them the power to take us hostage: do you 'really' believe in ...? (2012)

While Stengers and Abram largely restrict themselves to philosophical and anthropological terms, it does not take a great leap of thought to see that for them aesthetics might be one of the places where Western culture has the potential to escape the violence of its own colonial project. As Abram explains, Western thought, as a consequence of its logocentrism, has forgotten what produced it in the first place: namely, the vibrant materiality of its milieu, the power of the organic and inorganic world to leave an impress on bodies, to stimulate acts of creative poesis – what he refers to, lyrically, as 'the moon's dance in and out of the clouds' or 'the dazzle of the sunlight on the wind-rippled surface of mountain tarn' (2010: 281).

All of this I am in agreement with.

Ecology is inherently animistic, in the extent to which it decentres human agency, and, as Gregory Bateson (1972), Bruno Latour (1993) and Félix Guattari (2000) have all shown in different ways, places the *anthropos* in a network of systems that replaces 'individualism' with 'dividualism' – the idea that the human subject is constituted by, and

is always already part of, non-human processes and things that transcend the intentionality of its consciousness and boundaries of self. To argue for a reclamation of animism, then, in the way that Stengers theorizes and Abram practises, is to endorse an ecology of perception; to affirm that all human thought and feeling is produced in and by our participation in a creative cosmos that we can never master or control. The logic of such a move is to help to create a new ecological habitus that may play a part in a wider ethico-political strategy to alleviate the deadly spectre of the Anthropocene, an economically obsessed era that, as Bernard Stiegler has recently diagnosed, 'imposes an entropic becoming without a future' (2018: 75).⁵

And yet ...

There is something problematic in Abram's own writing, a paradoxical sentimentalism that causes suspicion. His romanticized images and metaphors, drawn as they are from a pristine view of the natural world, are, I think, at best domesticating and, at worst, clichéd. While they may allow for enchantment – the 'spell of the sensuous' (Abram 1996) – they tend to posit the animating pulse of the world as something benign and comforting, a reassuring sublimity. However, if we are to take animism seriously today – and I use the term in its 'new' sense to describe a world brimming with affective exchanges as opposed to yet another colonialist appropriation of indigenous knowledge – then it is imperative that we acknowledge the agency of the earth in a very different way. In the Anthropocene, to make the prognosis as Stengers does, that we are 'not alone in the world' (2012) is far from reassuring. On the contrary, it entails a difficult affirmation. In a world beset with climate change and other 'blowbacks' caused by the nature-culture assemblage, animism is coterminous with what geographer Nigel Clark points to as a 'dynamic, unpredictable planet' (2011: 5) that human knowledge can never master or control. Instead then of taking our animist metaphors from some nostalgic and retrograde modernist image bank, it may be more beneficial to mould them from the unpredictable and compromised earth of our own times. Such a shift would have the benefit not only of avoiding the 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) inherent in an overly

⁵ Stiegler's idea is very different from the geological usage of the word. For Stiegler, the Anthropocene describes an age of total and utter nihilism and entropy, the death of time and desire, 'the total proletarianization of the mind itself' (2018: 63). Against the sheer destructiveness of Anthropocenic becoming, Stiegler posits the Neganthropocene, a way of rethinking deferral that would allow for a proper future to emerge, that is to say, as something uncontrollable, even 'improbable' (63).

sentimentalized view of 'nature' that always posits the earth as an inherent good until it turns against humans. Just as crucially, it may produce more helpful forms of awareness that would allow humans to recognize their own fragility and responsibility, to create a generative 'undoing', one might say. In what follows, I will attempt to articulate the ambiguity of my response to Abram by focusing on Lee Hassall's film *Return to Battleship Island* (2013). In my analysis of the film, I want to advance and express what an animist mode of visual criticism may entail, in terms of critical thought and expression. The objective is to gesture towards an alternative way of making and thinking about art that looks beyond the positive but nevertheless problematic mode of enchantment inherent in Abram's citation and which remains dormant, too, in Stengers' ideas.

In the *Performance Research* issue on 'Ruins and Ruination' that I edited in 2015 with Richard Gough, I looked at *Return to Battleship Island* as a work that sought to combat the aesthetics of ruin porn – the tendencies of contemporary photographers and film-makers to void the ruins of our post-industrial present of both history and temporality (see Lavery and Hassall 2015: 112–25). In this article, I want to supplement and extend my earlier argument with a new theoretical perspective, one rooted in animism, and which attempts to show how ruins can come alive once more and 'touch us' in and through the very act or process of being represented – as something then very distinct to ruin porn. In 2015, I did not have the language of animism to hand in my attempt to understand the affective economy of the film, the way in which it performs on the bodies of spectators and allows for non-entropic becomings that are simultaneously ontological, political and ecological. In other words, animism provides the (necessary) frame that was missing in my initial attempt to communicate what I believe to be at stake in the film.

THE SITE

In the Summer of 2013, I led an interdisciplinary group of scholars on an AHRC-funded research project to map the ecological future of the island of Hashima in Japan, a place that is situated 16–18 kilometres or so off the coast of Nagasaki City

on the southern tip of the Japanese archipelago. Intriguingly with respect to Stengers' emphasis on reclamation we called the project 'The Future of Ruins: Reclaiming toxicity and abandonment' (AH/K005308/1). The island had been acquired by the Mitsubishi Company in 1890, and is now a toxic wasteland as a result of a century or so of offshore strip mining, and the effects of long-term radiation – the fallout – caused by the detonation of the second atom bomb, the Fat Man, over the skies of Nagasaki on 9 August 1945. After a period of intense prosperity during the second Japanese economic miracle of the 1950s, the island was abandoned in 1974 at lightning speed in the wake of the OPEC oil crisis the previous year. Hashima, then, quickly fell into a state of disrepair. Its reinforced modernist tower blocks, the earliest examples of such buildings in Japan, left to rot in the sun.

However, in the past decade or so, the dramatic landscape of the island, this space of ruined modernity among the waves, has attracted numerous artists, film-makers and photographers, all of whom, in their different ways, tend to see the island as a type of commodity, a place to be represented and imaged again and again, in such a way that the environmental damage inflicted upon Hashima is washed away, aestheticized out of all purview.⁶ To use the language of Jacques Rancière, we might say the island has been accommodated into a normative distribution, a mode of sensible configuration, in which there is no dispute, no dissensus, over its meaning, its significance (Rancière 2006: 12–20). Paradoxically, the more that Hashima is represented, the less we actually see it. As with other ruined cities such as Detroit, Hashima is now a place of 'ruin porn', an image shorn of history and affect, its sensuality a mere mirage. To look at in the plethora of images that depict it is, all too often, to be placed outside of it. The temptation is to dominate the island from a distance.

In the essay mentioned above, I described how *Return to Battleship Island* is a conscious attempt, on Hassall's part, to offer a different way of 'looking' at Hashima island, characterized by the production of a mobile and jumbled temporality that seeks to provide the ruins with a future beyond the static space of the

⁶ See, for instance, the work of the photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, who, in their coffee-table book *Gunkanjima* (2013), depict Hashima as a sublime example of ruin. There are no history or people in their images and the aesthetic is exactly the same as the one they used to represent Detroit. As opposed to Hassall's film, everything is still and static. The viewer is the master of all they survey. An alternative mode of representing ruins is found in Nicolas Geyrhalter's film *Homo Sapiens* (2016). In this long, durational work, the section of the film that concentrates on Hashima is connected to a larger meditation on abandoned futures in Europe and Asia. In it, Hashima resonates with the failure of Japanese capitalism, especially the economic problem of stagflation. Geyrhalter's images are pensive; they provoke questions and ask spectators to think with them.



■ A wave over a ruin in Hashima. ©Lee Hassall

screen. What I did not mention, however, is that in my experiences of watching the film with an audience, this distribution has been misunderstood and sometimes overlooked. For the thirty-minute duration of the film, which moves silently and relentlessly between images of the sea and fragmented images of the concrete island, spectators shuffle, whisper, type on their iPads, check their phones, cough, scratch and itch. They seem bemused, and in post-show discussions they often express a sense of anger and disappointment caused by Hassall's refusal to give a stable representation of the island that would allow them to take it all in – to consume it, one might say – in a single take. Ultimately, the film, through the syncopated rhythm of its editing, exists as a virtual 'thing' that touches us, that seeks to become, in Laura Marks' word, a type of 'skin' (2000). This skin, moreover, does not simply provide a limit to the image, a barrier that would contain and circumscribe its being. On the contrary, it allows the images that mobilize the screen to breathe, to emit an invisible and virtual radiance that targets the central nervous system, getting into the bloodstream, deregulating the heartbeat. The point of the film is not to show, but to transport – and through that transport to emit a 'pharmacological' spell, to heal through poisoning. In this respect the film is, to use Gilles Deleuze's terminology, both 'critical and clinical'

at the same time (1999: lv), a doubleness that has parallels with Abram's notion of the restorative powers of animist representation. But with the critical difference that Hassall's animism is not predicated on some pre-lapsarian return to 'nature'. Rather Hassall prefers to site his work in the poisoned soil of our Anthropocene present, in the toxic discharge of a ruined site. Crucially, *Return to Battleship Island* does not simply represent ruins; it exists as part of an affective *dispositif* of ruination, an apparatus that ruins as it represents, becoming the 'process' it purports to show.

ANIMISM AND THE ECOLOGICAL IMAGE

In the last sentence of her 1977 collection *On Photography*, Susan Sontag suggests that, 'If there can be a better way for the real world to include the imaginary, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well' (2005: 141). Sontag's anxiety, her call for a 'conservationist remedy' for photography, is caused by the fact that, for her, as for Guy Debord, images erode the real, and so facilitate post-industrial capitalism's obsession with spectacle and discipline: 'Cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers)' (140).

Although pivotal in expanding the field of eco-criticism to include images and not simply words, Sontag's viewpoint is limited. First, her hostility towards the 'eye' means that she ignores the power of images to 'counter their role as technological recruits in the war against environmental reality' (Ross 1994: 336). Second, by using ecology as a metaphor for thinking about human culture and society alone, she overlooks how images have a more complex and possibly progressive role in determining how we mediate and determine our relationship with the 'natural environment' itself. As the political theorist Franco Berardi notes: 'The repertoire of images at our disposal limits, exalts, amplifies, or circumscribes the forms of life and events that, through our imagination, we can project onto the world, build and inhabit' (2011: 133).

The philosopher Michel Serres advances an alternative approach to the ecology of the image that has closer affinities with how I use it in this article. In *Malfeasance: Appropriation through pollution*, Serres proposes that pollution be understood in terms of a dialectic between 'hard' and 'soft' forms of toxicity:

By the [hard] I mean on the one hand solid residues, liquids, gases, emitted through the atmosphere by big industrial companies or gigantic garbage dumps, the shameful signature of big cities. By the [soft], tsunamis of writing, signs, images, and logos flooding civic, public and natural spaces as well as landscape with their advertising. (2011: 41)

For Serres, images do not simply function like natural ecosystems, as Sontag supposes in her notion of conservation. Rather, they are ecosystems in their own right directly impacting on how humans exist within the world and earth, as well as with each other.

What is key about Serres' argument is that the ecological image does not have to exist as an image of ecology, that is to say, a direct representation of nature, as Abram wants. More expansively, if obliquely, its ecological value resides in the way it affects, in the atmosphere it emits. Where toxic images animate in a destructive sense by stimulating ever greater desires to consume, leading to a perverse erasure of connections and interdependencies, an ecological image is one that decentres and 'decreates', exposing the spectator to non-human

forces that have potential to point to a different way of existing. In *Genesis*, for instance, Serres, in a discussion of the fictitious painting *La Belle noiseuse*, says that images have the power to 'invent new musics and new harmonies' (1995: 24), disclosing, he says, 'possible worlds' (25).⁷ Importantly, such 'possibilisation' arises when the image is of such intensity that the object depicted loses its discreteness and becomes instead a conduit for chaos: 'Everything is founded in the possible, all representations originate in *La Belle noiseuse*, all states come to us from chaos' (24). When painters are able to tap the pre-individual, impersonal forces of chaos, the image, Serres tells us, is no longer something we look at; it becomes, rather, a living entity, a milieu that we are folded into, a sea whose roar – whose noise – animates us:

La Belle noiseuse is not a picture, it is the noise of beauty, the naked multiple, the numerous seas, from which a beautiful Aphrodite is born.... *La Belle noiseuse* is not a painting, not a representation, not a work; it is the master, the wellspring, the black box that comprises, implicates, envelops, in other words: buries all profiles, all appearances, all representations, and finally the work itself. (19)

Serres' analysis of *La Belle noiseuse* shows how the ecological image is an animist image, at least with respect to the terms proposed by Stengers. This is an image, moreover, that needs to be carefully composed to the point where the object represented, as in Hassall's pictures of Hashima, is always *on the verge of toppling* into the forces of chaos that it harnesses and emerges from. Instead, then, of establishing a solid ground for the spectatorial eye, the editing process puts objects and spectators in motion, transforming itself, in the process, into a dance, a gymnastics, a kind of visual animism. Or as Serres has it: 'We are all in search of what Plato named the *chôra*, a smooth and blank space prior to the sign: it is the dancer's body and it is the blank page, the virginal wax, where the choreographer writes.' (44)

ANIMIST THINKING

In an after-show discussion, someone described Hassall's film as 'a hard watch', a 'marathon'. The response, I think, is based on a nexus of factors

⁷ The painting – and it is a fictional one – features in Balzac's short story *The Unknown Masterpiece* (1831).

that include its minimalism, duration and refusal to provide the spectator with visual gratification. All we see are waves and shaky, partial shots of a ruin from a hand-held camera. At all times, Hassall reminds the viewer of the artificiality of the film, the fact that it has been made, pieced together. The wave we see, the wave that makes us seasick if we watch it for too long, is an image of the same wave. We think we are moving forwards, but in reality we have not moved at all. We are stuck, stranded on an endless reflux. As such, the implicit 'heroism' of the journey motif, so beloved of the ruin porn photographers and urban explorers who are attracted to the difficulty of getting to Hashima – it is, after all, a remote outcrop of rock that demands a certain kind of doughty commitment – is thus suspended, put on hold.⁸ The more you watch, the more you start to wonder. Is this really the East China Sea? Has the journey by boat actually been made? Is this Hashima? Has this been filmed by Hassall?

The images of the island itself add to the artifice – they are always seen through a pre-existing frame of sorts. Hassall knows that the island is a site of prior looking, a site of image pollution. How then to counter this pollution? For Hassall, the solution was simple: to place it *en abyme*, to foreground our looking, to show it as a construct, the picturesque exposing its own 'picturesqueness'. It is surely no coincidence that one of the first images of the island that we see is that of the island from the boat. This is the only time we see the island as a whole image. Tellingly, however, two things quickly happen to disturb the pleasure of this momentary plenitude, this halting. First, the image appears to topple into the sea, as if it were the victim of some earth tremor; and, second, the image brings to mind another image repertoire, a celebrated one this time: Monet's hazy depictions of Rouen cathedral, painted at more or less the same time that Hashima was being strip mined. Hassall takes us, the viewers, to Japan, and we end up thinking of French Impressionism, an art movement that was fond of Japanese and Chinese art, seduced by an image of the Orient. Could the same thing be happening here with Hashima? Easy to suspect it is. Hassall's Hegelian joke, then: you go to Japan, and find nothing but yourself, your own image bank. But for all his playful cynicism, Hassall is

not there just to tell jokes, to reverse the gaze. For what, I would wager, is lurking beneath these images is nothing other than geo-historical context, the same context that Impressionism, like the picturesque, was so concerned to brush stroke out of history: the eco-cide of industrialized modernity, the 'inconvenient truth' that we are all more than happy to forget. In Hassall's film, the eye, ultimately, fails to lose itself in the wave. It is always returned – and again and again – to mangled fragments of industrial destruction, to the very history that scarred the island.

The second way that Hassall disturbs the picturesque eye, the eye that is comforted by this strangely familiar stage set of ruins, is by producing a sense of what Walter Benjamin terms 'distraction' (1969:231), in his famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. Whereas 'serious art' looks to fix our attention, to compel us to look at an image with a febrile, concentrated gaze in such a way that we do not see what resides behind the picture, Hassall, through the drone-like rhythm he sets up between images of the sea and images of the island, encourages the viewer to turn their attention to the side, to think of other things, to take in the image as one wills, as one can, on one's own terms. Importantly, Hassall produces this distraction not by abandoning or dematerializing the film, but by fashioning animist images, images that touch the viewer and immerse them in the flow of the film, in how they produce drift.

Nevertheless, and at the same time, Hassall complicates this sense of immersion by producing an image of a wave that moves so much that our ability to concentrate is rendered inoperable. In the movement between looking at the vertiginous waves, and the slower (though still moving) images of the island, the eye is placed in an ambivalent space, caught, we might say, in the constellation of Gemini, wanting the image to end, wanting the image to continue. And, to return to Benjamin, what happens in this restless, irritating shift of images, if the audience is willing to stay with it, is, as I have mentioned previously, the production of a state of free-floating association. Importantly, this distraction is not the vapid distraction that we

⁸ For more details on these artists, see Lavery and Hassall (2015:117–18).

normally experience when bored, the distraction that T. S. Eliot lambasted in the poem 'Burnt Norton' in *The Four Quartets* (1943). Rather, it is an animist distraction, a distraction that has been filtered through, and remains haunted by, the 'touch' of images. In this animated, non-binary state of distraction, the mind takes off on its own errant journey, simultaneously able to wander where it will, and yet at the same time directed, encouraged into taking certain routes. So as I watch the thirty-minute duration of the film, and feel discomfited by its repetition, I start to set sail on a surfeit of visual analogies, all of which work together to create an eco-historical wave. First, I go back to the past and think of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a novella, published in 1899, which resonates with ideas of imperial exploitation of the planet's human and natural resources; then, I change direction, and think, obviously perhaps, of the bomb dropped on Nagasaki, which drenched Hashima with black rain; then, things in the image start to speed up, and I am reminded of other sites of abandonment and ruin, Chernobyl, Fukushima, Bhopal, bright-green rivers in China; then I hear the opening chords of Neil Young's 1975 song, 'Cortez the Killer' about the conquistador Hernán Cortés, and link the line 'dancing across the water' with the holocausts and eco-crises that have taken place in Central and South America since the sixteenth century to the present; after which I turn to the future, and to the thought that Hashima might prefigure what is to come on an archipelago that is famous for earthquakes, tsunamis, tremors; and then, I wonder, in my animated state, if Hashima could be seen as a site-specific archive, a testament to an earth that is in the process of 'unworlding' itself, and is now open to the unsentimental play of the elements that have been in motion for so much longer than us, *Homo sapiens*.

These multiple thoughts and ideas that *Return to Battleship Island* amasses on top of each other, in unexpected configurations and agglomerations, are examples of the animated thinking produced by the ecological image, an image that troubles our conventional way of looking at the world by leaving an impress on the retina, the animistic touch of which allows the distress of the earth to emerge via a process of analogy and connection.

ONTOLOGY

In Hassall's film, images of waves follow waves. The images seem to twist and turn, to flux and reflux; they are turbulent. Instead of an iconography (the representation of a discrete object), Hassall give us what Serres in his discussion of *La Belle noiseuse* in *Genesis* calls 'ichnography', the oceanic background or atmosphere in which objects are immersed, their 'noise': 'Ichnography is not harmony, it is noise itself.... There precisely is the origin. Noise and nausea, noise and navy belong to the same family' (1995: 19).

As I watch the film, as I have done on many occasions now in the company of diverse audiences, I tend not to watch it with my eyes, but with my abdomen. I breathe with it, taking it in through my body, through my skin, through my mouth and thorax. Infected by airborne molecules, by inhalation and exhalation. Hassall is not interested in staging the image of Hashima, in the crystalline terms that both poet Ezra Pound and novelist Stendhal speak of, as something 'hard' and 'distinct', a kind of illumination. On the contrary, what Hassall has tried -- and, I think, successfully -- to give us is the indistinctness, the background haze, that surrounds Hashima, and that blinds our eyes, as we try to make it out. In this spray, this animist buzz of atoms, Hashima is part of everything else, enveloped in a streaming, composite world, no longer a place or site in its own right, but always a place that is washed with and by the flux of becomings.

The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk might think of Hassall's film, if he ever chanced upon it, in terms of foam, the airy, ungraspable substance that vanishes when we touch it. In *Foams*, the final instalment of *Spheres*, his mammoth three-volume study of morphology and ontology, Sloterdijk proposes that foam is the form that best designates our current way of being in the world, a world that has now lost the contours of an older physics, the distinctiveness of objects being set apart from each other in space, within their own enclosed bubbles or spheres. In the delicate foam world we live in, what Sloterdijk names 'aphrology', after the goddess Aphrodite, beings and entities are composite, relational, contingent -- fragile ecosystems (2016: 27-71). They affect

and merge with each other momentarily, before uncoupling and taking off again in the search for new relationships, new turbulence. This has important ecological purchase in that the foam world, for Sloterdijk, is a world of interpenetrating systems and open-ended fronts, a world of 'unpredictabilities' and delicate alignments. When blown by a strong gust of wind, foam alights where it will, where it can. It follows no set trajectory, and knows nothing of Euclidean geometry, with its distinct lines and shapes. Like the waves, and like the goddess, Aphrodite, that produced it, foam is destined to disappear, to disperse, but also to melt into things. It is experienced in the beat or fainting of rhythm, in a gap that is never empty.

As a result of its commitment to foam-like, floating movement, *Return to Battleship Island* offers a possibility of rethinking our ecological being in the world. Hassall's film shows the island, an abandoned and toxic ruin, in the process of being reclaimed by the sea. In his picture of the waves, he points out the *vanitas* of human dwelling and gestures towards a future that will have erased the false hope of concrete, our obsession with permanence. The ruin here is not left waiting, as Benjamin's ruins are in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, for a moment of redemption, some arc of messianic transcendence from a place beyond history (1998: 226). Rather the ruin, in finest Japanese tradition, is imaged, as the architect Murielle Hladik points out, in the process of being washed away, scattered to the winds, to the sea (2008: 57–75).⁹

In the foam world that Hassall conjures, there is no need to be made heavy or melancholic by this loss of solidity. For to live in foam is to affirm lightness, to embrace a new fragile ontology, if you will, a type of being that accepts its own impermanence, and is willing to face up to its own disappearance with a curious and complex blend of sadness and joy. What I am trying to say here is that Hassall's film, in the so-called age of the Anthropocene, allows us to imagine an earth with a much longer geochronology than ours, and which posits human existence as mere froth on a wave. In the respect to which Hassall's waves evoke foam-making turbulence and express, without ever making the mistake of spelling it out, the invisible atmosphere or noise of the world –

its ichnography – they give us, I think, a striking example of the ecological work an animist image might do. It is important not to conflate that animistic intimacy with a Romantic view of the world. In *Return to Battleship Island*, the image does not represent the sea – 'nature' – as an object to look at, as a grounding for a masterful subject. Rather, it shows that we are connected to, bound by, and yet, for all that, somehow distanced from the animating pulse of the world – and always, it goes without saying, at its mercy. For, as Michel Serres points out, turbulence is both a 'state of birth', and 'a death threat' (1995: 121), a median experience in which nothing is ever resolved in any permanent sense. The difficulty, as well as the urgency, we face today might be how to reconcile ourselves with this animist noise, this exuberant foam, without overestimating our chances of ever being able to do so. In other words, the film asks what it might mean to be part of a fragile ecosystem, to be as finite as the planet on which we depend and that remains indifferent to our plight, as it continues on its own autotelic orbit. In this context, animism is not a source of transcendence or redemption, but a creative becoming, an outside that exists beyond human concerns, even as it provokes humans to live better with the worlds they are in and part of.

TANGIBILITY

In the animist reading I have advanced, *Return to Battleship Island* offers a new future for the ruins of Hashima. Importantly, there is no scenario sketched out for what that future may be. On the contrary, the future is always already here in the very act of experiencing and being disrupted by the work, again and again. In this respect, the work makes the future tangible through a logic of touch, by producing a sense of intimacy with the blasted landscape of images we look at and move through corporeally. In the syncopated rhythm it produces, the film allows spectators to see that they very definitely are 'not alone in the world', as Stengers says.

To make something tangible is not to grasp or hold onto it as a representation or image to gaze at or decipher. It is rather to be opened to its elusive caress and passage, to be with it as it passes in and through the world. From an animist

⁹ In her chapter 'Une absence de la ruine au Japon?', Hladik shows how the ruin has a very different status in Japan than in the West. In Japan, the ruin is not privileged as a trace of some original plan. On the contrary, it hardly exists at all to the extent that dilapidated buildings and decaying structure are simply rebuilt as they were. In Japan, then, there is a performative relationship to the ruin, one in which impermanence and simulation are championed. The point is to celebrate emptiness, not to conserve.

point of view, then, *Return to Battleship Island*, like the ruins it shows, operates as a kind of intermediary or messenger. It seeks to open a dialogue between two different parties who may or may not need help in negotiating a dispute. In the Anthropocene, the ‘dispute’ that the film negotiates is ultimately between the viewer and a ruined earth. Its critical and curative dimension resides in how it helps us to distance ourselves from the ideological fixity of a capitalist ‘present’ that would attempt to perpetuate its violence forever, and, instead, to experience the possibility of a different future coming into being as an affective charge, and not as a scenario that has already been thought through. The seasickness or nausea that the film generates, through its persistent and multiple returns to a moving wave, is where its futural potential resides – in how it makes tangible the open-ended flux of the world as something to endure and to be changed by. When read in tandem with the materialism of thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze, Michel Serres and Peter Sloterdijk, the ‘new’ animism proposed by Stengers provides a resonant vocabulary for mapping that metamorphosis, for intuiting a new future of/for ruins.¹⁰ With *Return to Battleship Island* firmly in mind I would like to finish this article with a suitably provocative and open-ended statement from Murielle Hladik: ‘Là où il n’y a plus rien, l’histoire peut réapparaître à nouveau’ (There where there is nothing, history can reappear differently) (2008: 64, my translation).

REFERENCES

- Abram, David (1996) *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human-world*, New York: Vintage.
- Abram, David (2010) *Becoming Animal: An earthly cosmology*, New York: Vintage.
- Bateson, Gregory (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Benjamin, Walter (1969) ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’, in *Illuminations: Essays and reflections*, trans. Harry Zorn, New York: Schocken, pp. 217–52.
- Benjamin, Walter (1998) *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London: Verso.
- Benjamin, Walter (2009) *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. J. A. Underwood, London: Penguin.
- Berardi, Franco (2011) *After the Future*, Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Berlant, Laurent (2011) *Cruel Optimism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Clark, Nigel (2011) *Inhuman Nature: Sociable life on a dynamic planet*, London: SAGE.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1999) *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel Smith and Michael A. Greco, London: Verso.
- Eliot, T. S. (1943) *The Four Quartets*, New York: Harcourt & Brace.
- Guattari, Félix (2000) *The Three Ecologies*, London: Continuum.
- Harvey, Graham (2005) *Animism: Respecting the living world*, London: C. Hurst & Co.
- Hladik, Murielle (2008) *Traces et Fragments dans l’Esthétique Japonaise*, Mardaga: Wavre.
- Latour, Bruno (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lavery, Carl, and Lee Hassall (2015) ‘A future for Hashima: Pornography, representation and time’, *Performance Research* 20(3): 112–25.
- Marchand, Yves, and Romain Meffre (2013) *Gunkanjima*, Göttingen: Steidl.
- Marks, Laura (2000) *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural cinema, embodiment and the senses*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rancière, Jacques (2006) *The Politics of Aesthetics: The distribution of the sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, London: Bloomsbury.
- Ross, Andrew (1994) *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature’s debt to society*, London: Verso.
- Serres, Michel (1995) *Genesis*, trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Serres, Michel (2011) *Malfeasance: Appropriation through pollution*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Sloterdijk, Peter (2016) *Foams: Spheres III: Plural spherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Sontag, Susan (2005 [1977]) *On Photography*, London: Penguin.
- Stengers, Isabelle (2012) ‘Reclaiming animism’, *e-flux* 36, <https://bit.ly/35e6j9U>, accessed 31 May 2019.
- Stiegler, Bernard (2018) *The Neganthropocene*, trans and ed. Daniel Ross, London: Open Humanities Press.

¹⁰ This future is very different from how Hitler’s architect Albert Speer envisioned the future of ruins. Where Speer wanted the ruin to give the Berlin of the Third Reich a patina of historical conquest that would rival the cities of Rome and Athens, the future I am discussing is essentially unrepresentable and improbable. It cannot be foreseen.