

# 10-« Quelque chose qui flotte, qui bouge... qui grouille... ». Some Flows of the Formless in Late Anthropocene Fiction

écrit par Terry Harpold

**Abstract:** This essay addresses a diffuse category of matter figuring with increasing urgency in our imaginaries of the sea, its subsurfaces, and landfalls: mobile, shapeless biological and geophysical phenomena that are among the most devastating and unsettling evidence of our ongoing planetary ecological crisis. Drawing on an image of a massive jellyfish bloom in Jean-Marc Ligny's 2012 post-Anthropocene novel *Exodes*, I briefly explore the relevance of the subjective experience of abjection to the churning, boundary-crossing structure of the image, before turning to George Bataille's related concept of the *formless* (*l'informe*) and its leveling of anthropomorphism as a defining structure of human and non-human experience. I argue that Ligny's vision of a clotted, pinkish soup churning at the ocean's surface signals the tasks of the formless in imagery of the Anthropocene's decline: the unsparing foreclosure of a naïve anthropomorphism and the basis of a utopian post-anthropology.

## I. A Partial Inventory of Unquiet Matter

*Nous sommes si infirmes, si désarmés, si ignorants, si petits, nous autres,  
sur ce grain de boue qui tourne délayé dans une goutte d'eau.*

*[We are so infirm, so helpless, so ignorant, so small, we others, on this  
spinning grain of mud mixed with a drop of water.]*

*- Guy de Maupassant, "Le Horla" (1887)*

I will give here the sketch of a work in progress that addresses a diffuse category of matter figuring with increasing urgency in our imaginaries of the sea, its subsurfaces, and its landfalls – estuaries, nearshore, foreshore, backshore – all the places of contact between water, earth, and the human: mobile, *formless* phenomena that are among the most devastating and unsettling evidence of our planetary ecological crisis. These include, among others: hypoxic dead zones, current and weather-disrupting temperature anomalies known as “blobs” because of their appearance on satellite imaging, *E. coli*-laden rafts and deep-sea clouds of marine mucilage (“sea snot”), phytoplankton, algal, sargassum, and jellyfish blooms, upwellings of microplastics from deep-sea hotspots, great trash gyres (“garbage patches”), massive oil slicks from drilling, pipeline, and tanker accidents, and spills on land that make their way to

the sea. And so on. We could extend this list more widely and more distressingly<sup>1</sup>.

A common trait of these menaces is that they may flow inland, thus dissolving the distinction between solid and liquid, or press, insistently, against barriers we would mount against them to preserve the distinction. However we define this contact zone, it's not a hard border – that's a geographical concept, not a hydrological or imaginative concept – because the shore is also a mutable surface, as much in motion and in transformation as what it holds back<sup>2</sup>. Efforts to hold back or hold fast are in this regard only temporary measures to plug openings that are always-already vulnerable to the deep *shapelessnesses* enacted at the contact zone. Which is to say, they are momentary distractions from larger specters of frightful mutability. When we focus on the image of a beach dotted with tens of thousands of tarballs, we look away from the archaic horror of the ungainly blob from which the tarballs were spawned. Surveying the bathtub ring stain of a red tide on the sand, the shapes of satellite images of temperature anomalies, or of the widening spans of trash gyres (Lebreton), is to look away from featureless interiors and restless heterogeneity. This is what is limiting in inventories of the restless and the shapeless, such as the one I began with: one fixates on partitioning shapeless things into series of discrete menaces or parades of menaces, and misses the general character of their undifferentiated flow and pressure.

What I'm reaching for here is a more concise way of describing the flow and pressure of these sorts of unquiet matter, in addition to their immediate perils. Another name for the ecological shapeless: *unquiet matter*, matter that refuses to remain stable or hold to its designated range and sense<sup>3</sup>. My examples are in all but one or two cases drawn from literary texts; the modern cinema of environmental crisis would be a comparably rich source of images in a more narrow sense of the term. They do not come from notionally scientific inventories of the shapeless and the formless, aside from the partial inventory cited above (which, as I've already indicated, poses a number of conceptual problems). Those are, I find, often too marked by disciplinary repressions of the unclassifiable and a disciplinary reluctance to think clearly about the *transgressive passions* of our ecological imaginaries.

## II. Quelque chose qui flotte

Once you are alerted to its motions you will detect the flow and pressure of shapeless matter across the modern canon of ecological fiction, in much wider use than stories about the futures of anthropogenic global warming. What these texts have in common is a symptomatic – I use the term advisedly – dissolution of boundaries and hierarchies that is, I propose, the signal operation of an emerging ecological order. To name but a few capriciously-chosen examples: the clotted, sunken morass of abandoned London in Richard Jefferies's *After London* (1885) and J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962); the tidal sludge and sargassum-choked shallows of William Hope Hodgson's *The Boats of the "Glen Carrig"* (1907); every body of water thickened and deoxygenated by the Earth's passage through a great cloud of propylene glycol, in Ted Thomas's and Kate Wilhelm's unjustifiably neglected *The Year of the Cloud* (1970); the endless landscape of blackened mud in Rafael Pinedo's *Plop* (2004), named for the sound the newly-born protagonist made when he fell from his mother's womb into the muck at her feet; the Dreamtime terrains of an Aboriginal detention camp located in a swamp, its surface a tracery of rainbow-shaded oil slicks pushed along by raggedy black swans, in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013); the polysemic-semic-asemic tranformation of the matter of octopus bodies – "la poulpe devient encre. Noire, puis eau [the octopus becomes ink. Black, then water]" – in Vinciane Despret's *Autobiographie d'un poulpe* (2021). Pretty much all of the matter in Area X, the stretch of the Florida panhandle isolated after the mysterious "Event" of Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014) flows and turns, inchoately, into something else. Sand in motion can behave as a fluid; the salt-crusted dunes of J.G. Ballard's *The Burning World* (1964) – the novel's global drought is the effect of a layer of industrial polymers deposited on the oceans' surfaces, preventing evaporation – and the Cadillac-desertic dreamscapes of Las Vegas of his *Hello America!* (1981), or the Amargosa, the vast hallucinatory inland desert sea of Claire Vaye Watkin's *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015), would qualify for inclusion on this list.

Here's another example that illustrates with uncanny vitality the force of the shapeless in these settings. *Exodes* is the second book in Jean-Marc Ligny's *Aqua*<sup>TM</sup> tetralogy – *Aqua*<sup>TM</sup> (2006), *Exodes* (2012), *Semences*

(2015), and *Alliances* (2020). Briefly, the series begins in the mid-XXIst century with the failure of our civilization to draw back from the climate change precipice, resulting in chaotic human mass migration, global pandemics, savage class conflict, and brutal wars for dwindling fuel, food, and water. The crisis continues through the next several novels, through the collapse of economies and nation-states, the emergence of degenerate death-driven subcultures in the dwindling human population, and a planetary sixth great extinction more terrible than the End-Permian event 250 million years ago, which extinguished an estimated 57% of biological families and 83% of genera. The series concludes sometime in the XXIIIrd century – no one keeps track of the calendar any more – as a tiny remnant of humanity scattered across the few remaining climatically stable regions of the planet enters into unequal alliance with the new pinnacle species, genetically hybridized, intelligent ants and termites, and the Anthropocene epoch comes to a definitive end. Each of the novels averages more than 400 pages in length and includes multiple principal characters; threads of the plots are deeply and sometimes confusingly entangled. The narrative voice throughout is a compelling fusion of unsparing and fatalistic description of alienation and suffering, but also clear affection for the human protagonists, who are variously despairing, cruel, compassionate, and resilient. The novels deserve to be better known outside of France. To my knowledge there is no equally sustained, fully-realized account of the futures that may await us by another author writing today.

*Exodes* is probably the bleakest of the series. It recounts the mostly unsuccessful efforts of a half-dozen characters to find refuge from the accelerating savagery of the late XXIst century. Among them are a married couple, Olaf and Risten Eriksson, who flee the social collapse of their native land, the Lofoten archipelago of Norway, and sail their trawler *Ragnarok* southward over the drowned cities of Northern Europe in search of safe harbor, improbably, in the Kerguelen Islands – aka *les Îles de la Désolation* – of the sub-Antarctic<sup>4</sup>.

As the trawler approaches Dunkirk Harbor, abandoned and mostly submerged, Risten, who is watching from the bow, calls to Olaf to come see something she cannot describe –

Il stoppe le moteur et, laissant le *Ragnarok* filer doucement sur son erre, rejoint sa femme à l'avant. Elle est penchée au-dessus de l'eau - il se penche donc à son tour.

À première vue, il trouve juste à l'eau des reflets roses, pense qu'ils sont dus aux ultimes feux du couchant. Puis il remarque que, non, ce ne sont pas des reflets. *Quelque chose* colore l'eau en rose. Quelque chose qui flotte, qui bouge... qui grouille. Sa vue accommodant, il distingue soudain ce que c'est.

Des milliers - des *millions* de méduses. Toute la rade en est couverte, à perte de vue.

Olaf émet un ricanement nerveux. C'est le premier signe de vie qu'il découvre dans cette mer depuis des lustres - et il faut que ce soit quelque chose de potentiellement mortel. La mer en est tellement saturée qu'elle est devenue comme une espèce de soupe rosâtre frémissante, dégageant un relent acide. Il a entendu parler d'une mutation des méduses, devenues plus corrosives que de l'acide chlorhydrique, parvenues - faute de prédateurs - au sommet de la chaîne alimentaire marine et capables de liquéfier toute matière organique, voire minérale. Elles ne sont pas encore montées jusqu'aux Lofoten, mais, l'eau se réchauffant à vitesse grand V, cela ne saurait tarder...

[He stops the engine and, letting the *Ragnarok* gently drift along, joins his wife at the front. She is leaning over the water - so he leans in too.

At first glance, he finds only pink reflections in the water, thinks that they are due to the last fires of the sunset. Then he notices that, no, they are not reflections. Something is coloring the water pink. Something that floats, that moves... that swarms. His vision adjusting, he suddenly sees clearly what it is.

Thousands – millions of jellyfish. The whole harbor is covered with them, as far as the eye can see.

Olaf lets out a nervous chuckle. It's the first sign of life he's seen in this sea in ages; of course it would be something potentially deadly. The sea is so saturated that it has become a kind of pinkish soup, simmering with an acidic smell. He has heard of a mutation in jellyfish, making them more corrosive than hydrochloric acid and placing them – for lack of predators – at the top of the marine food chain, able to liquefy any organic matter, even minerals. They have not yet reached the Lofoten Islands, but as the water warms...] (390-91)

What is it about this scene that makes it seem *excessively* suggestive of a planetary decline? Jellyfish blooms are not new phenomena; there are fossil records of blooms going back at least a half billion years (Gershwin, *Stung!*)<sup>5</sup>. More numerous and widespread blooms are a recognized peril of worsening global warming: many jellyfish species flourish under conditions of eutrophication, rising temperatures, and increased ocean acidity that kill other marine life. Scientists predict a more “gelatinous” future for some ocean ecosystems, in which cartilaginous and bony fish will cease to be apex predators (Richardson, *et al.*).

Yet there's something else at work here, a symptomatic element – again, I use the term advisedly – of this image of a diffuse, pinkish *soup*. Ligny's jellyfish are not the balletic, dream-like *Discomedusae* of Ernst Haeckel's proto-Art Nouveau gallery of zoological and phytological wonders (*Kunstformen de natur*, 1899-1904), nor the delicate “living art” depicted in coffee-table sized books celebrating the beauty and grace of jellies (Gershwin, *A Natural History*; Connor and Deans)<sup>6</sup>. They are a clotted, barely-differentiated solution of mobile flesh, their numberless bells less like individual animals than bubbles rising thickly to the surface of an ocean in the process of becoming gelatinous. What arrests the gaze here – Olaf's gaze, our vicarious gaze – is the *shameful* movement of these heralds of a featureless abyss *in the process of turning over*: a suffocating heterogeneity that travels, repellantly, under its own power.

It seems to be a subjectless heterogeneity, though perhaps it is not unreactive or unaware. Jellyfish lack the brain and central nervous system of other animals, though they possess neural nets that control their movements and connect to sensory receptors (Gershwin, *Jellyfish*). There is intriguing evidence that at least some jellyfish species exhibit distinct waking and sleeping states (Nath, *et al.*). Their experiences of mind, such as they are, must be more diffuse and more marginally subjectified than we can imagine. If the pink soup of Dunkirk Harbor can then be said to act or to think with even the slimmest of purposes it must do so *otherwise* than we do: agency and thought as pure operations of unquiet matter. It's all uncannily a little too efficient for us to bear, except with a nervous chuckle of the kind elicited by stories of slime molds – affectionately referred to as “blobs” by their devotés – navigating a maze (Dussator), or the clumsily *pouring* bodies of the molds' science fiction film precursors (Fredo and Bava, Yeaworth). The very idea of this, not an altogether-thoughtlessness but a headless-thoughtlessness, is offensive to members of our species, living as we do in brain-centered, melancholy isolation from one another, moving about with confidence that the spaces between our bodies define us. In Ligny's unsettling/unsettled image, countless gelatinous individuals are congealing into a plenum, prodigally and continuously becoming the same substance. *The water is wrong all the way to the horizon* – à perte de vue – and, we assume, *it is in the process of becoming wrong all the way down*.

### III. The Flow of the Formless

It's tempting to characterize all this churning of surface and below-surface as the production of abject materiality. Certainly the yuck factor, on a very grand scale, suggests the disorienting affects that Julia Kristeva attaches to the abject. The repulsive sensation of a crossing of boundaries that menaces integrities on each side is close, as well, to the insistent mobility of the image. And, comparable to Kristeva's inventory of the abject upwellings of the body – vomit, urine, blood, sperm, shit, pus – Ligny's roiling horizon of pink soup, moving outward and downward from the gaze, is fundamentally interfacial. Recall the paradigmatic example of abjection that Kristeva cites in the opening pages of *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*:



Lorsque cette peau à la surface du lait, inoffensive, mince comme une feuille de papier à cigarettes, minable comme une rognure d'ongles, se présente aux yeux, ou touche les lèvres, un spasme de la glotte et plus bas encore, de l'estomac, du ventre, de tous les viscères, crispe le corps, presse les larmes et la bile, fait battre le cœur, perler le front et les mains.

[When this skin on the surface of milk, inoffensive, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, puny as a nail clipping, presents itself to the eyes, or touches the lips, a spasm of the glottis and even lower, of the stomach, of the belly, of all the viscera, tenses the body, squeezes the tears and the bile, makes the heart beat, the forehead and the hands bead.] (10)

In the moment of the gaze alighting on or the lips briefly touching the surface of the milk, a simultaneous fixing and crossing of a margin between us and the other side *matters* in every sense of the word. It makes no difference that you could hold a glass of clotted milk at arm's length or below your nose and mouth, what is decisive is that the surface of the milk that you can't, or don't want, to touch or taste is materially transforming beyond you, toward the bottom of the glass. The skin is a featureless something that limns the threshold between the subject and something else, neither subject nor object (Kristeva 9). It could only be worse - this is implied by the process of *clotting* - if the skin went all the way down.

Kristeva's emphasizing of our repugnance to daily reminders of abjection - how we are compromised by traces of a primordial fractioning off of the ab-ject from the subject as such - that, at least the primordiality and the recurrence of the experience, are also partly right for my purposes, in that they specifically attach anxiety and disgust to a traversal of boundaries. But I think that the sensation elicited by the Kristevan abject - though it is closely allied with the sensation elicited by unquiet matter - may be too narrowly defined by the subject's self-interests. It doesn't address the full range of transgressive passions of an encounter with, not only an abject *something*, but also a clotted *everything that is provisionally not the subject*, and which works to absorb the subject into *its* undifferentiated field.



I think I prefer Georges Bataille's version of this encounter.

Un dictionnaire commencerait à partir du moment où il ne donnerait plus le sens mais les besognes des mots. Ainsi *informe* n'est pas seulement un adjectif ayant tel sens mais un terme servant à déclasser, exigeant généralement que chaque chose ait sa forme. Ce qu'il désigne n'a ses droit dans aucun sens et se fait écraser partout comme une araignée ou un ver de terre. Il faudrait en effet, pour que les hommes académiques soient contents, que l'univers prenne forme. La philosophie entière n'a pas d'autre but : il s'agit de donner une redingote à ce qui est, une redingote mathématique. Par contre affirmer que l'univers ne ressemble à rien et n'est qu'*informe* revient à dire que l'univers est quelque chose comme une araignée ou un crachat.

[A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks [*besognes*]. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.] Georges Bataille, "L'Informe" (1929)

This brief paragraph from the "Dictionnaire Critique" of *Documents*, the magazine edited by Bataille during 1929 and 1930, has had an outsized influence on art history and theory since the mid-1990s, when Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss's curated exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, *L'Informe, mode d'emploi (Formless, a User's Guide)* was based on these few words and their supposed knocking of mimesis and its cousin *thematized* form from off of their pedestals, putting in their place the work (*besognes*) of asemic operations and negations of form (Bois and Krauss, *Formless*; Krauss, "Informe.") I take no firm position on the fevered institutional debates attached to their definition of the formless,

though I am inclined to agree with Georges Didi-Huberman's counter-argument in *La Ressemblance informe* (2019) and related observations by Pierre Fédida, Paul Hegarty, and others, that the work of Bataille's *formless* was never the negation of form, or the disclosure of a beyond of form, but rather form's ineluctable, unresolved precarity and active transgression in art and in life more generally, and what this means for our experience of transgression. That is where the matter of the formless *matters* – in the sense of process, not state or import – precisely in terms of what Bataille calls *base matter*, stubbornly resistant to idealization and flattening all impostures of dressing it up in absolutes (Bataille, "Matérialisme," "Le Bas matérialisme"). A universe becoming spider, worm, spittle, and pink goo fills us with anguish because it won't hold still in place of something else, and it won't stay only itself. Bataille's observations in this regard are among the most brutal and incendiary criticisms of a cultural dominant that elevates mimesis in alliance with a rational vision of the world in which humans are upright, at the world's pinnacle and not, horizontally, in the muck with everyone else (Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance*). "In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal." The unfinished varieties of the formless force a leveling of anthropomorphism: the undoing of *anthropos* as the privileged shape, not merely the privileged center, of things.

## IV. Transgressive Passions of the Formless

Qu'est-ce que le mucus de la mer? La viscosité que présente l'eau en général ? N'est-ce pas l'élément universel de la vie ?

[What is marine mucus? The viscosity of water in general? Isn't it the universal element of life?]

– Jean-Baptiste Bory de Saint-Vincent (c. 1822), in Jules Michelet, *La Mer* (1861), in Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves* (1942)<sup>7</sup>

My basic claim here is that we must move away from reading inventories of the menaces of a hotter world as discontinuous, if entangled, changes in the definitions and relations of self to other, and read them more as a continuous mattering of all. My sense is that the reality of the crisis emerges at the limits of our capacities to classify its encounters, even as we undergo them, in a definite way; the existential truth of the crisis is expressed in its errant forms and in the ongoing lacerating and debasing of a notional integrity of self that only appears integral because we insist on measuring experiences with versions of ourselves. (Others'

experiences are likely not as anguished as ours. The most acephalic of animals, jellyfish and the medium in which they move probably are not shameful to themselves<sup>8</sup>.) To put this in terms that are closer to Didi-Huberman's characterization of the *unquietness* of unquiet matter: we have to learn how to read images of the formless – literary images, filmic images, poetic images, and so on – as *symptoms* of matter's pressure on the impostures of anthropomorphism. Symptom (disordered, slippery, always in movement) and not sign (an entity that is comparably more limited even when its meaning is uncertain). Images of the ongoing transformation – the list I began with, Ligny's horizon of limitless pink goo – do more than figure rational or irrational conjectures about what might come to pass; they carry with them affects that signal the precarity of representation and the allures of its dissolution (Didi-Huberman and Lacoste). There are possible outcomes of this situation, formed under this pressure, that we have been reluctant to embrace because we have imagined them only as high tragedy, cynical melodrama, and annihilation. It appears difficult for us to think of them on their own terms, as Bataille might have proposed, even as profligate, exuberant transformation and an emergent politics of generosity (Stoekel, Timofeeva).

We might think of the roiling surfaces of the formless, then, as a forecast of a general leveling of the Anthropocene. It's a version of what follows the peaks of the Great Acceleration, that grand inventory of the future present – peak population, peak energy, peak food, peak CO<sub>2</sub>, peak temperature, etc. Was there ever a visual conceit more anthropomorphic than these graphs rising asymptotically from a distant, uneven but relatively stable past to an extreme present-in-crisis that is wholly our responsibility? More like a mathematical frock coat constructed expressly to give the rest of the world our shape? A *general* leveling, a reorienting of the whole from the vertical to the horizontal, will occur when the graphs reach the state where modeling fails completely and they smear in in crisis and anguish and abyssal suffusions more declassing and *liberating* than any geometric tracery could capture. In that moment of its triumph over academic men, the ecological formless rejects the shabby costume assigned to it; it crawls and seeps out of every patched tear in the lining, like spiders and spit and jellyfish and the rest, all the recalcitrant symptoms of the coat's dubious frippery.

Olaf and Risten Eriksson do not make it to the Kerguelen Islands; they barely make it past Dunkirk. The hyper-acidic, clotted waters force them ashore, and they disembark for supplies and search another way southward. Then they simply disappear from the novel. There is a brief, cryptic suggestion that their movements on land are being tracked by a band of Mangemorts, the most horrific of the degenerate death cults of *Exodes*: humans who feed on other humans for lack of other prey. It is, to be sure, an alarming and heartbreaking turn of the plot.

But it's also true to the challenge that Ligny's compassion poses for us throughout the series and in this case especially – to love his characters enough to obscure their awful deaths but also to not spare them their suffering – and it's true as well to the formless's tasks (*besognes*) in imagery of the Anthropocene's decline: the unsparing foreclosure of a naïve anthropomorphism, consonant with the lacerating dimensions of Bataille's thought, and an opening toward utopian post-anthropology that his thought might prefigure.

The latter assertion – that there is a utopian task for the formless, even in the muck and the goo – needs more unpacking and nuance than I have space for here. But I would say this with, appropriately, Olaf's nervous chuckle in mind: in a *general* ecology, a human might learn to live with and among others more fluid than itself, as in a soup, a continuous flow, a viscous blob: in the world in which the human is more like water in water (*l'eau dans l'eau*) – or jelly in jelly – than Bataille imagined us capable of being<sup>9</sup>. Or if we seek a more solid footing, in an immanently vital compost (Haraway) of tragic and convivial heteronomy, and not in an illusory and melancholy autonomy, from which we cannot see the moving whole that draws us into its undefined field.

The transgression of anthropomorphism by the formless, its smearing into an endless series of roiling surfaces at the conjunction of anguish and laughter, and something equally extreme and akin to ecstasy – points to an extending of a Bataillean left-handed sacred, unlucky, taboo, and unproductive<sup>10</sup>, on the outer edge of the Anthropocene: more leveling than elevating, more lacerating and dispersing of forms than holding them together and holding them fast. Such a formulation of a path forward in this crisis would be more about experiencing our transgressive passions as authentic, tragic, and unfinished responses to

the prospects of loss and extinction, and new ways of making kin and keeping with the trouble, as Donna Haraway might put it, in the ruins of the near future. More about those things than the feckless confidence games of denial and assured survival, or the hollow consolations of righteous indignation and bitter grief.

---

## Works Cited

Alaimo, Stacy, « Jellyfish Science, Jellyfish Aesthetics: Posthuman Reconfigurations of the Sensible », in C. Chen, *et al.* (dir.), *Thinking with Water*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013, pp. 139-64.

Bachelard, Gaston, *L'Eau et les rêves; essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Paris, J. Corti, 1942.

Bataille, Georges, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970.

Bataille, Georges, « Collège de sociologie [5 février 1938] », in *Œuvres complètes*, t2, pp. 319-33.

Bataille, Georges, « Le Bas Matérialisme et la gnose », in *Œuvres complètes*, t1, pp. 220-26.

Bataille, Georges, « Informe », in *Œuvres complètes*, t1, p. 217.

Bataille, Georges, « Matérialisme », in *Œuvres complètes*, t1, pp. 179-80.

Bataille, Georges, *Théorie de la religion*, in *Œuvres complètes*, t7, pp. 281-345.

Bois, Yve-Alain, and Rosaline E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, New York, Zone Books, 1997.

Connor, Judith L. and Nora L. Deans, *Jellies: Living Art*, Monterey, Monterey Bay Aquarium, 2002.

Darrieussecq, Marie, *Précisions sur les vagues*, Paris, P.O.L., 2008.

Didi-Huberman, Georges, « La Matière inquiète (plasticité, viscosité, étrangeté) », *Lignes*, vol. 1, 2000, pp. 206-23.

Didi-Huberman, Georges, *La Ressemblance informe, ou, Le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*, 3e édition, Paris, Éditions Macula, 2019.

Didi-Huberman, Georges and Patrick Lacoste, « Dialogue sur le symptôme », *L'Inactuel*, vol. 3, 1995, pp. 191-226.

- Dong, Yangzhu, *et al.*, « Chronic Oiling in Global Oceans », *Science*, vol. 376, 2022, pp. 1300-4.
- Dussutour, Audrey, *Tout ce que vous avez toujours voulu savoir sur le Blob sans jamais oser le demander*, Paris, Équateurs, 2017.
- Fédida, Pierre, « Le Mouvement de l'informe », in *Par où commence le corps humain. Retour sur la régression*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2000, pp. 11-27.
- Freda, Riccardo, and Mario Bava, directors, *Caltiki, il mostro immortale* [*Caltiki - The Immortal Monster*], Galatea Film, 1959.
- Gershwin, Lisa-Ann, *Jellyfish: A Natural History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Gershwin, Lisa-Ann, *Stung! On Jellyfish Blooms and the Future of the Ocean*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Haraway, Donna J., *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016.
- Hegarty, Paul, « As Above, So Below; Informe / Sublime / Abject », in *The Beast at Heaven's Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*, edited by Andrew Hussey, Amsterdam, Editions Rodopi, 2006, pp. 73-80.
- Krauss, Rosalind E., « Informe Without Conclusion », *October*, vol. 78, 1996, pp. 89-105.
- Kristeva, Julia, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur : Essai sur l'abjection*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1980.
- Lebreton, L., *et al.*, « Evidence that the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is Rapidly Accumulating Plastic », *Scientific Reports*, vol. 8, 2018, p. 4666.
- Ligny, Jean-Marc, *Alliances*, Nantes, Librairie L'Atalante, 2020.
- Ligny, Jean-Marc, *Aqua™*, Nantes, Librairie L'Atalante, 2006.
- Ligny, Jean-Marc, *Exodes*, Nantes, Librairie L'Atalante, 2012.
- Ligny, Jean-Marc, *Semences*, Nantes, Librairie L'Atalante, 2015.
- Maupassant, Guy de, *Le Horla et autres contes cruels et fantastiques*, Paris, Éditions Garnier Frères, 1976.
- Nath, Ravi D., *et al.*, « The Jellyfish *Cassiopea* Exhibits a Sleep-Like State », *Current Biology*, vol. 27, 2017, pp. 2984-90.
- Richardson, Anthony J., *et al.*, « The Jellyfish Joyride: Causes, Consequences and Management Responses to a More Gelatinous Future », *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*,

vol. 24, no. 6, 2009, pp. 312-22.

Stoekl, Allan, *Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion, and Postsustainability*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Timofeeva, Oxana, *The History of Animals: A Philosophy*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018.

Timofeeva, Oxana, *Solar Politics*, New York, Polity Press, 2022.

Yeaworth, Irvin S., director, *The Blob*, Paramount Pictures, 1958.

Zhuo, Yue. « Alongside the Animals: Bataille's 'Lascaux Project' », *Yale French Studies*, vol. 127, 2015, pp. 19-33.

---

<sup>1</sup> The latest reports by Working Groups I, II, and III of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report (AR6, 2022, <https://www.ipcc.ch>) warn of multiple processions of these and similar changes of global marine ecosystems notable for their amorphous spread. Technical reports of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Marine Debris Program (<https://marinedebris.noaa.gov/reports-and-technical-memo>) describe with alarm the role of microplastics diffused throughout these ecosystems. A recent analysis of more than 500,000 images captured by the European Space Agency's Sentinel-1 orbital satellites estimates that the total surface area of ocean oil slicks, most of which are in coastal waters, is more than twice the total land area of the nation of France (Dong). And so on.

<sup>2</sup> "Est-ce la mer qui arrive sur la côte ? Ou la côte qui arrive sur la mer ? Est-ce la terre qui interrompt la masse de l'eau, ou l'eau qui limite la terre ? [Is it the sea that reaches the coast? Or the coast that comes to the sea? Is it the land that interrupts the mass of water, or the water that limits the land?]" (Darrieussecq, 4). Here and below all translations from the French are mine.

<sup>3</sup> I draw the term "unquiet matter" from Georges Didi-Huberman's elegant, evocative essay (2000) on wax sculpture as a test case for thinking about the plasticity of matter and expressive form, by way of Bataille, Freud, and Sartre. "Le « paradoxe de consistance » que la cire impose par sa plasticité peut donc se comprendre comme la possibilité - fatalement inquiétante - d'un va-et-vient de la ressemblance et de l'informe. Un va-et-vient lié, non plus au monde du *disegno* - le dessin, le dessein - et de l'idea, mais aux propriétés intrinsèques du matériau. [The 'paradox of inconsistency' that wax imposes by its plasticity can thus be understood as the possibility - fatally disquieting - of a coming and going of resemblance and the formless. A coming and going linked, not to the world of the *disegno* - the drawing, the design - and the idea, but to intrinsic properties of the material.]" (219).

<sup>4</sup> Olaf chooses Kergulen as their destination because of its extreme isolation and likely abandonment (*Exodes*, 149); the Islands are often described as among the most isolated places on the globe. I think Ligny may be engaging in some canny intertextual play here: the Islands figure prominently in Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) and Jules Verne's revisionary but no less strange sequel to Poe's novel, *Le Sphinx des glaces* (1897): remote locales at the unnatural border of the known world.

<sup>5</sup> The term "jellyfish" is commonly applied to animals in two different phyla: Cnidaria, which includes the class Scyphozoa, the "true jellyfish," and Ctenophora, the comb jellies, which have no tentacles and swim with the use of clusters of cilia, or "combs." Ligny's *méduses* appear to be cnidarians.



[6](#) See Alaimo on the aesthetic emphasis of popular-scientific representations of “gelata,” and their ambiguous significance in emerging posthuman discourses of environmental concern.

[7](#) Immediately following this twice-removed citation Bachelard observes, “Nous vivons alors des rêves gluants dans un milieu visqueux. Le kaléidoscope du rêve est rempli d’objets ronds, d’objets lents. Ces rêves mous, si l’on pouvait les étudier systématiquement, conduiraient à la connaissance d’une imagination mésomorphe, c’est-à-dire d’une imagination intermédiaire entre l’imagination formelle et l’imagination matérielle. [We live slimy dreams in a viscous environment. The kaleidoscope of the dream is filled with round objects, with slow objects. These soft dreams, if we could study them systematically, would lead to the knowledge of a mesomorphic imagination, that is to say, of an intermediate imagination between the formal imagination and the material imagination.]” (128).

[8](#) Cf. André Masson’s image of a headless (anti-)Vitruvian Man for Bataille’s public review *Acéphale* (1936–39).

[9](#) Bataille, *Théorie de la religion*, 292. See Timofeeva, *The History of Animals*, and Zhuo on the limits of Bataille’s concept of animality in this regard. Even more than the (vertebrate) fish that Timofeeva shows Western philosophers have fixated on as the image of nonhuman immanence, jellyfish may be the most water-within-watery of the members of the Animal kingdom.

[10](#) Bataille, “Collège de sociologie [5 février 1938],” p. 331.