

# Water, as an element of the senses

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Water, a unique experience for the body and mind, all our senses are caught by its impalpable and elusive matter.

From the fresh and clear water reflecting a contemplative nature, to the violence of the waves colliding against the rocks, water is more than an element of vital survival to living beings, it embodies a duality of life and death, of softness and violence, it is the ontological metamorphosis (of being) of earth and fire. Through this double poetry, this «double participation», it plays then a psychological role, she becomes matter, she becomes soul<sup>1</sup>. In this essay, I will explore the sensations and experiences that water provides both through the conscious and the unconscious.

Throughout this reflection, I will be particularly guided by the thoughts of the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard and especially by his work, *Water and Dreams*. However, other artists, philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists will also be referred to in support my remarks. I will try to cross the various spectrums and senses that the element Water can embody. Sight and hearing will come back as the first senses of this experience.

These last centuries (especially in Europe), sight is considered as the pure truth («I believe what I see» Saint-Thomas), however it is far from being an objective truth. In «The eyes of the skin», Juhani Pallasmaa writes: «Vision separates us from the world whereas the other senses unite us with it»<sup>2</sup>. According to him, the sense of sight systematically passes through a reading and an interpretation of our brain. This makes our vision of the world totally subjective, while the other senses are deciphered more directly, without over-analysis.

If the poets use their gaze on the forms to create allegories, Bachelard, himself gives a different vision, a «direct image of the matter». «The sight names them, but the hand knows them». The image is linked to the imagination and to emotion, as Bachelard elaborates at length in his work «one dreams before contemplating». We will refer to this image throughout the essay, not the seen, photographic image, but that of a whole experience, lived, psychic and rich with sensations, a phenomenological approach to the image. To develop and deform our perceptions in order to animate them better.

*« La faculté de déformer les images fournies par la perception, elle est surtout la faculté de nous libérer des images premières, de changer les images »*

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1 Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les Rêves (Water and Dreams)*, ed. Le livre de Poche, p. 19  
2 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The eyes of the skin*, ed. Wiley, p. 28

Bachelard, p. 7

- *The faculty to deform the images provided by the perception, it is especially the faculty to free us from the first images, to change the images -*

For the sound experience, we will rely mainly on the book «Soundscape» by the Canadian composer and theorist, R. Murray Schafer. From the very first lines of the text, he highlights a planetary problem that stems from the modern world: sound pollution. «The world soundscape has reached an apex of vulgarity»<sup>3</sup>. He denounces the extent to which man has become accustomed, over the last few centuries, to a kind of sound background, an ambient noise, which we have now learned to ignore. The concept of the «soundscape», initiated by Schafer, will be at the heart of this essay. It is defined as the interaction of man with his environment, where the influence of both is reciprocal. It is both a physical environment and the perception of that same environment, it is a nature and a culture.

In his work, Murray Schafer identifies several characteristics of the soundscape. And the latter is more precisely cut and classified into three types of sounds: «keynote sounds, signals and soundmarks». The first, *keynote*, is defined by the ambient sounds that are present everywhere and daily, and to which we do not pay particular attention, «they are overheard but cannot be overlooked». The *signals* are more conscious sounds that can't be ignored. Finally, *soundmarks* are sounds that correspond to very specific contexts and that make them unique, they have a precise meaning for each community. The term is derived from the visual expression «landmark». Thus, this ensemble creates the soundscape, like an infinite music played in chorus, with its different musicians and performers. This is the idea behind «the world as a huge musical composition, unfolding around us ceaselessly»<sup>4</sup>.

The essay will be divided into three parts to explore different typologies of water. The first part is about clear water, pure water, that of lakes and rivers. Then the second part focuses on the salty and infinite water of seas and oceans. And finally, the third part outlines a different approach since we will talk about the experience of immersion, of the body submerged under the surface of the water.

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3 R. Murray Schafer, *Soundscape*, ed. Destiny, p. 3

4 R. Murray Schafer, p. 205

## Clear water

Clear water is essential to man as a source of life. In the collective imagination, it is also the bearer of numerous images that have been anchored for thousands of years.

As Terje Oestigaard points out, fresh water has always been a strong link in the collective imagination, both for its physical states through hydrology and for its metaphorical form, through beliefs. This element allows a reading of the relations between human, and also between human and the gods. «Since water is both an element in nature and culture and constantly changing its character, but still being the same, it has transformative capacities which no other element has»<sup>5</sup>. Water is the element of the conscious and the unconscious.

One of the characteristics of fresh water is its evolution during the seasons, between dry season and monsoon, drying of the riverbed and flooding. Each territory, each religion, each season calls for a ritual to make it rain or to stop the rain. Rivers or springs are elevated to the rank of deity, considered by believers as having the power to heal the sick and to defeat death. Terje Oestigaard differentiates two types of roles for water: one «holy» and one «sacred». From the beliefs of indigenous peoples to the great religions of today, through myths and ancient religion, water has always been at the heart of religious metaphors and rituals. To this day, the world's largest religious ritual, the Hindu Kumbha mela festival, is a water ritual.

In addition to its characteristic visual purity, the sounds caused by the flow of water have long been equated with the power of the gods and the force of nature. The sound of a waterfall or a rushing river is for many communities the loudest sound they have ever heard. This accentuates the sacredness and uniqueness of this element. The sounds of water are in the landscape of the *Signals*, source of life and survival. These places are sometimes used for spiritual and religious rites. The white sound of a waterfall is a place very conducive to meditation, altered states of consciousness, even trance<sup>6</sup>.

Even so, in poetry the sounds of water are often described with a very infantilizing vocabulary, as a simplification of nature. We speak of pure and fresh water reflecting the image of the virgin soul, of a living nature, a pure harmony, almost childish.

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5 Terje Oestigaard, *Water*, p. 48

6 Terje Oestigaard, p. 45

*«The rivers of the world speak their own languages.»*

R. Murray Schafer, p.18

Thus each community has, when speaking of water, its own language, its own metaphor and its own reading and listening. Murray Schafer speaks of an «acoustic community» and for him, sound gives vital information. As mentioned in the introduction, sound marks are unique to each space and have their own meaning. They allow a territory, whatever its scale, to have a recognizable sound signature, giving a sensitive identity to a place.

However, it is necessary to move away from the spiritual in order to understand its limits. Indeed as Bachelard points out : «The psychology of purification is a matter of material imagination and not of an external experience»<sup>7</sup>. It then becomes the simple material symbol of the pure and by reciprocity of the impure. Thus, it embodies a double symbolism, pure water purifies, it washes the body and the soul, the fluid gives life, it is maternal. Impure water, on the other hand, is harmful and turns into a viscous substance of evil. «It can be charged with an indefinite amount of evil. It can be cursed; that is to say, it can be used to put evil into an active form»<sup>8</sup>. We will come back to this subject when we talk about salt water.

Thus we can have two readings of this water, Bachelard states two distinct actions: «to see and to show oneself», on the one hand, water is like a mirror in which is reflected a nature and a world, and on the other hand a will to appear.

«Water serves to naturalize our image»<sup>9</sup>. As in the myth of Narcissus, our reflection in water is much more powerful than the one in the mirror-object. The reflection in the water allows an «open imagination», it is not clear, somewhat distorted, the colors are reinterpreted and especially it is not only one's own face but a face with all the landscape that surrounds it. Our reflection is only one protagonist among many others. We are reflected in a matter, a medium and not in an object. Schopenhauer evokes, him, an aesthetic contemplation, it is about the attraction, the human's curiosity in what is offered to him to see, «the will to contemplate». This

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7 Gaston Bachelard, p. 163

8 Gaston Bachelard, p. 160

9 Gaston Bachelard, p. 32

experience allows a respite in its fight against its desires. By allowing ourselves to be carried away by an image, we allow ourselves to enter a mental universe: «The more a person's mind is absorbed in the world as a representation, the less he feels the suffering of the world as a Will.»<sup>10</sup>. Thus, by contemplating ourselves, indirectly, we detach ourselves from a reality to plunge into a new one, the one we contemplate. Nature offers thus a double reading: «the contemplated nature and the contemplative nature». The two are linked and reciprocal.

*« Le lac est un grand œil tranquille. Le lac prend toute la lumière et en fait un monde. »*

Bachelard, p. 39

*- The lake is a big calm eye. The lake takes all the light and makes a world of it. -*

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10 Wikipedia, Arthur Schopenhauer's aesthetics

## Salt water

For the salty and deep waters, there is a different approach. Gaston Bachelard mentions only the waters of the hilly landscape and the rivers which run in Champagne in the North-East of France where he comes from, far from the coasts and the sea. Salty water often considered as impure—is frequently seen as secondary and frightening in its infinity. Bachelard takes a certain pleasure in mocking it, he will only refer to «the waters that do not need infinity to retain the dreamer».<sup>11</sup>

However, we can refer to his work for his study of the depths of the waters and the violence that we can attribute to them.

As mentioned in the previous section, water follows a virtuous cycle, so all water ends up in the oceans, in this dark water. Edgar Poe and Bachelard agree that clear water always ends up becoming heavy and dark. It dies, thrown into the infinite. «So any primitively clear water is for Edgar Poe a water that must become dark, a water that will absorb black suffering. All living water is a water whose destiny is to become slower, to become heavier. Every living water is a water that is about to die.» And the reverse does not exist, a «dead» water must change state, become air again, before returning to its initial purity. Salt water is perceived as a failure. It cannot satisfy the basic needs of man. What could be more impure than non-potable water? «Impure water, for the unconscious, is a receptacle of evil, a receptacle open to all evils; it is a substance of evil.»<sup>12</sup>.

By this nature, we could evoke this water no longer as a matter but as a substance. Where on the horizon the sky melts into the sea, when one does not distinguish any more the island from the star, the fish from the bird: it is «the reversibility of the great spectacles of the water»<sup>13</sup>. It is often this visual infinity which returns as principal characteristic of these waters. The stories of the sailors are always adventures of the far, where the coasts are not visible any more, where nobody ever went. The myths of the sea are local tales, each region, each city, each ship has its own story, its own mythology of the ocean. Bachelard complains «the sea gives tales before giving dreams»<sup>14</sup>, it is flooded with preconceived images of creatures that inhabit it. And its indominability, does not afford any more space for the dream. The sailor returning from his journey, returns as a hero, he has survived the hostile element.

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11 Gaston Bachelard, p. 23

12 Gaston Bachelard, p. 163

13 Gaston Bachelard, p. 64

14 Gaston Bachelard, p. 174

Its blackness is like a shadow which covers it, the shadow of the sky, the shadow of its own matter. The water «swallows the shadow like a black syrup»<sup>15</sup>. It plays thus the allegory of death, it absorbs the souls, its infinity becomes intimate and personal. It is to sink into the unknown depths of the abysses, where the light does not penetrate any more, in the world of creatures still unknown, to fill oneself with its great muffled noises and to let oneself sink into the substance.

And as always, life is reciprocated in this allegory. In Greek mythology, all gods and living beings come out of the ocean. Cradled in the amniotic liquid of the mother, the couple Oceanos and Tethys (rulers of the waters) are at the origin of all the divinities, the elders of the Titans.

In Nordic mythology, the couple Aegir and Ran embody the malevolence and benevolence of the ocean. They reflect the changing nature of the sea with Aegir's calm and Ran's destructiveness. Mythology alone provides infinite readings and complex interpretations. Its influence is essential and has greatly contributed to the imaginary way of looking at the oceans.

However, let's return to the coast where the waves hit the rocks with great violence. The sound of the waves, whatever their power, is inexhaustible. «Each drop tinkles at a different pitch; each wave sets a different filtering on an inexhaustible supply of white noise.»<sup>16</sup>. The sound of the sea marks our minds. In *Architecture and the Body*, Pierre Godo regularly uses a musical lexical to describe the way our bodies live, inhabit a space. «We unfold within it [a space] and it vibrates within us or we vibrate within it according to a certain tempo». This is especially true for the oceans, which are beyond human scale and uncontrollable. Where the whole space is surrounded by vibrations, lapping and rumbling. Man remains a spectator to the performance of the sea and its orchestration.

*«The sea is the main sound of all maritime civilizations.»*

R. Murray Schafer, p. 16

15 Gaston Bachelard, p. 68

16 R. Murray Schafer, *Soundscape*, ed. Destiny, p. 16

## Below the surface

To finish this essay, I would like to dwell on the experience of water in its depth, exploring the sensory experience of being within it.

To take up Bachelard's words, and his reflection about the swimmer, the element of water has the particularity of attracting, «to see water is to want to be in it»<sup>17</sup>. By its dynamism, the first experience of swimming is similar to a first drama, a first act. We must overcome our fear, dive into the dark fluid, we are no longer masters of our movements, we must learn to adapt to it, to its waves, to its tempo. «In the water, victory is rarer, more dangerous, more deserving than in the wind.»<sup>18</sup>. The novice swimmer must tame this new element, but cannot dominate it.

Georges Lafourcade: «The sea is an enemy that seeks to overcome and that must be defeated; these waves are as many blows that must be faced; the swimmer has the impression of hitting with his whole body the limbs of the opponent»<sup>19</sup>.

When we dive into the water, the experience becomes purely physical, it is no longer a question of the mind but of the pure sensations of the body.

Richard Serra evokes the body as the experience we have of horizontality and verticality, of materiality, of gravity and weight. Water promotes this new approach to our own body, to the way we move it, to its sensations. We are transported into a new environment, into a new substance, we perceive our body and our sensations differently.

In interviews, the artist Bill Viola returns regularly to one of the great inspirations in his work. When he was 6 years old, he fell into a lake and sank to the bottom. He opens his eyes and discovers a wonderful world that bewitches him. A mixture of blue and green, the rays of the sun dancing in the liquid, the particles floating. He is hypnotized, to the point that he struggles when his uncle comes to pick him up.<sup>20</sup>

Water becomes the vehicle for the reflections of a metaphorical world, an element of both life and death, the symbol of both purity and destruction. Diving is a total experience. Gaston Bachelard cites Diolé to speak about the new sensations that a place can give us. We are transported into an unknown mental space.

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17 Gaston Bachelard, p. 187

18 Gaston Bachelard, p. 184

19 Georges Lafourcade, *La jeunesse de Swinburne*

20 Bill Viola, interview by Anna McNay for Studio International, Novembre 2015



«To go down in the water or to wander in the desert, is to change space», and by changing space, by leaving the space of the usual sensitivities, one enters in communication with a psychically innovative space. «One does not maintain more in the Desert than at the bottom of the sea : a small leaden and indivisible soul.» This change of concrete space can no longer be a simple operation of the spirit, as would be the conscious of the relativism of geometries. One does not change place, one changes nature.»<sup>21</sup>

Thus, immersion is the sensory experience par excellence, both frightening and pleasant. It takes us back to our first moments of life, when we were still in our mother's womb. Cradled in the amniotic fluid. It is finally the environment we are most familiar with, water is the only element that can cradle us. «Water carries us. Water rocks us. Water puts us to sleep. Water gives us back our mother.»<sup>22</sup>.

In French, although the etymology is different, la « mer » and la « mère », the sea and the mother are pronounced the same, making the allegory of this mother nature even more powerful.

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21 Gaston BACHELARD, *La poétique de l'espace* (the poetics of space), p. 231-232.  
Quote, Philippe DIOLÉ, *Le plus beau désert du monde*, p.178

22 Gaston Bachelard, p. 150

## Conclusion

To conclude, we agree that water, whatever its form and reading embodies a strong duality, that of life and death. Through the virtuous cycle of hydrology, water symbolizes immortal matter, the pure water of the river flows into the dark sea, to be transformed again into rain and return to the stream. «Water never dies».

Thus, water by its sound, its purity, its reflection, its sacredness, its fluidity... has different readings and interpretations. Each culture, religion, community has a meaning, a link and a different relationship to it. Throughout this essay, we have seen that the sound of water was one of the primary elements of this culture, marker of community, it is the language of water. A language that some hardened ears have been able to decrypt.

This essay covers only a tiny part of its meanings, and is largely influenced by a French culture, both by references to Gaston Bachelard, and by myself.

Finally I would like to end this essay with a last quote from «Water and Dreams» which seems to me to represent this infinity of possibilities and this constant experience:

*«There are no other real jumps that are jumps «into the unknown». The jump into the unknown is a jump into the water»*

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