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Becoming River

Daniel Fetzner

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Abstract

Becoming River is a sensory ethnography along the course of the river Murg in the Black Forest. A media-ecological probe – equipped with cameras, microphones, and sensors – drifts from the spring that is the river's source to its confluence with the Rhine. The object, constructed from alluvial material, is both an actor and a piece of passive flotsam. Over the course of several months, it weaves a narrative in which observations and events become entangled.

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Tobias Conradi, Florian Krautkrämer, Vanessa Zallot (eds.)
Interactive Documentary and Non-Fiction Media

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Tobias Conradi, Florian Krautkrämer, Vanessa Zallot (eds.)

Interactive Documentary and Non-Fiction Media

Relational Practice and (De)Stabilized Reception

[transcript]

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Becoming River

Daniel Fetzner with comments by Adrian Schwartz

Pissing in a river watching it rise
Patti Smith

Becoming River[1] is a sensory ethnography along the course of the river Murg in the Black Forest. A media-ecological probe – equipped with cameras, microphones, and sensors – drifts from the spring that is the river's source to its confluence with the Rhine. The object, constructed from alluvial material, is both an actor and a piece of passive flotsam. Over the course of several months, it weaves a narrative in which observations and events become entangled. The probe is collecting audio-visual micro-narratives and technical data at the same time. Whenever it gets stuck, broken, or even lost, it creates crucial intersections with the river. As sensory ethnographers we[2] explore those events, which flow as fragments into the interactive web documentation of our artistic research project *De\Globalize*.[3] This artistic research renegotiates the grammar of space, borders, and scale in order to deglobalize the notion of the global. It thereby focusses on three key questions:

1 https://becomingriver.com/

2 The "we" is our artistic research group mbody, a collaboration with the philosopher Martin Dornberg. The "we" is also the Lab for Media Ecology at Offenburg University with the sound artist and programmer Ephraim Wegner and the filmmaker Adrian Schwartz.

3 The artistic research cycle De\Globalize (2014–) is a media-ecological exploratory movement for the terrestrial. It is situated at the border between critical zone sciences, biology, anthropology, and media ecology and aims to research their relations of proximity, symbioses and critical overlaps and conflicts. Our artistic, media, and philosophical techniques therefore also use reflexive and diffractive methods and try to exhibit these and make them visible and researchable. After examining *matters of fact* in India, *matters of waste* in Egypt and *matters of care* in the Upper Rhine, the focus turned towards *matters of violence* in the Congo. From matter to mater, mother-earth, the garden to exploitation. From science, water, and climate to migration, oppression, and extermination. The results are accessible via the interactive web documentation. The platform http://deglobalize.com serves as a continuous media-archaeological archive for a speculative ethnography.

1. How to think, fold, and answer the earth in a deglobalized topology?
2. How to represent alterities, entanglements, and relational *references* through critical zonings in the parasitocene?
3. How to narrate critical zonings in nonlinear, improvisational, transmedial cuts?

The authorship of us researchers is interwoven with the co-authorship of the river Murg and a multiplicity of further non-human actants. Current weather conditions, sewage discharges, and the characteristics of the riverbank lead the search for the narration to precarious points. The probe meanders through critical zones of the Murg, passing paper mills, crossing the world of microorganisms and plants, swimming through canal systems and over the property of car manufacturers and power stations, alongside one hundred and thirty-five thousand human inhabitants.

The filmic assemblage becomes accessible in the form of a non-linear assembly, in which different velocities merge into one another: noiseless currents in the center of the river, maelstroms in the peripheral zones, calm and stagnant waters on the banks.

We use the principle of meandering by any river in order to search for the terrestrial (Latour 2018). Whenever our probe gets stuck in the undergrowth or in human-made facilities, we undertake agential cuts (Barad 2007). Wherever the strolling artefact accidentally lands, diffractive slices of reality and narrative bridges are created via cinematic interventions. We implement the organic and apparative perspectives obtained in our interactive web archive as a living meshwork (Gaudenzi 2012). Since life is knotted like a story (Ingold 2015), we consider each apparent node as an organic bifurcation. *Becoming River* is a diffractive practice which does not intend to simplify the proceedings, but to reveal its repressed complexity. A dense web of stories, techniques, actions, and coincidences in which our existence is radically embedded. We try not to disentangle the occurring phenomena nor to fetishize them as best we can.

In the lower course of the river, the straight line dominates within the industrialized modern sections of the Murg. On its forays, the floating artefact refuses the constancy of a fixed viewpoint that pretends to be outside the reproduced. *Becoming River* assumes that this linearity harms our world relationship because of its totalitarian presumption. We are therefore experimenting with an ethnographic change of perspective that abolishes the separation of subject and object, of people and environment. In our stereographic projection method (Fetzner, Wegner, & Bisig 2023) we explore an uncommon zero-person perspective to encounter the earth. New intermediate spaces and topological foldings are created by relating inner and outer zones to one another through so-called transitional objects. The aim is not a proliferating confusion of actors, but rather a co-operative struggle and negotiation between the actants involved.

This interactive application creates an embodied mirror cabinet without a rotating point of view. The multiple relationships of the objects and actants and their diffractive gaps[4] become tangible and affectively perceptible. As part of the installation and in the context of its further artistic processing in the interactive documentation, delirious images and montages are generated in order to evoke an imaginative vertigo.

This vertigo involves not only visual and auditory artefacts, but also real situations and movements (Bergson 1991). We assume that the resulting time-images (Deleuze 1989/90) tend to have a haptic-tactile component. They have a sensory, direct effect on the nervous system. In other words, their own haptic formats and textures open up new possibilities for experience and interaction. We use these interactive fragments as catalysts of a coherent, elastic, and ultimate thinking.

Our artistic research projects (Fetzner & Dornberg 2015) are generally based on Michel Serres's media-theoretical concept of the parasite (1980) and Claude Lévi-Strauss's principle of bricolage (1966). Both strategies are inherently wild-growing and uncontrolled. We favor the mode of what Deleuze & Guattari (1987) call "ambulance sciences", which are firmly associated with the nomos, the territory, and the smooth space of the sea.[5]

In our media-ecological surveys, we use Jakob v. Uexküll's term "forays" (2010) literally. In *Fogpatch* (2007),[6] cyberneticist Max Bense strays across the Golden Gate Bridge and experiences a bodily collapse. In *Pickup* (2010),[7] performance artist Harald Kimmig rides through Cairo on a pick-up truck and amplifies intercorporeal phenomena with his environment via his musical instrument. In *Peaupli* (2012),[8] the dancer Graham Smith roams through a working-class neighborhood of Freiburg, falls and seriously injures his shoulder. In *Fuchsfurz* (2020),[9] a parasitic media probe takes off from a Critical Zone observatory in the Vosges Mountains, spirals up into the stratosphere, bursts at an altitude of 36 kilometers, and finally crashes to the ground. In *Inner Congo* (2022),[10] white men wander through their intimate heart of darkness in a foreign territory.

***

4 We use the term "diffraction" in the sense of Karen Barad (2007) as in https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/d/diffraction.html

5 Deleuze & Guattari differentiate two types of epistemic procedures: The royal sciences involve reproduction, iteration, and reiteration. They are subordinate to the logos, while ambulance sciences resist predictability and specialize in inventing new problems.

6 http://fogpatch.metaspace.de

7 http://pickup.metaspace.de

8 http://pp.metaspace.de

9 http://deglobalize.com/idoc/#FUCHSFURZ

10 http://deglobalize.com/idoc/#InnererKongo

Becoming River is particularly based on three preliminary works set in Egypt:

A. 1300 BC. Moses is washed up on the banks of the Nile in a reed basket. The story raises the existential Latourian question "*Où atterrir*?" [Where do we come to rest?] (2019).
B. As part of our artistic research project *Wasteland*,[11] the philosopher Graham Harman raves about object-oriented ontology (OOO) and concepts of New Materialism amidst the waste workers at the Garbage City in Cairo. Harman first refuses to join the situationist experiment because he is afraid of exposing himself to the stinking matter. Finally his curiosity wins out, and he literally moves at eye level with his flat ontologies.
C. The performance *Nile Vodoo*[12] explores the terrestrial quality of the Nile, a ship, and alluvial land in the form of a performative drilling. A Voodoo priest reads Coleridge's Kubla Khan during a *felucca* trip and plunges me into the floods in the course of a hypnotic voodoo ritual. The two of us fight our way back into the boat with the last of our strength against the violent current of heavy metals and organic waste. The surface of the water resembles a curved spherical segment, a view of earth from space.

The Murg is a diffractive universe

11 http://deglobalize.com/idoc/#WASTELAND
12 http://deglobalize.com/idoc/#NILEVODOO

Our exploration abandons the concepts of a "wholeness" or "singularity". It counteracts the seductive Gestalt law of emergence, claiming rather that the parts should be considered as more important than the illusion of a "whole". Just as we assume that there is no creator who looks upon a self-contained "whole earth" with a clear beginning and end, we reject the colonial ideology of a vanishing point in the infinite. Instead, *Becoming River* understands life as an improvisation with limited resources carrying some kind of lunacy on board.[13]

Notes

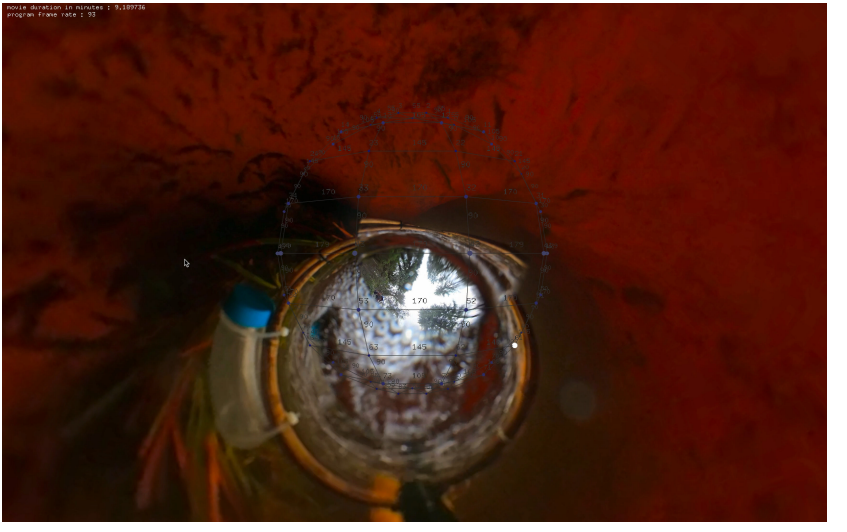
1. "A Long time ago, water was a bodily ghost. Finally the ghosts disappeared."[14] The suspension of this existential "struction" is part of the modern desperation.
2. On the riverbank, the view floats over the current. This is most impressive when masses of water carve their way after heavy rainfall. Boundless power, flowing noiselessly in the center of the stream, while the gaze is directed towards the swirling currents and maelstroms on the banks, where all the small dramas take place. Calm and stagnant waters are located in an immediate neighborhood. All flow velocities are represented and merge seamlessly into one another. Many thinkers and poets have been captivated by the magic of this stream for thousands of years.
3. Michel Foucault (2006) thought water next to madness. Both seem closely connected in the dream of the rational occidental mind. The madman is delivered to the river with its thousand arms.
4. In his metaphysics, Aristotle accorded the straight line a superior position to the curve. This can be considered as a starting point of the recurring defamation of the meander. From then on, figures of deviation are seen as pliable, adaptive, and opportunistic – but also as insidious, chaotic, and evil.
5. Today, the meander has become fashionable again. Volker Demuth (2023) puts it like this: "The meander oscillates between analysis and history, reflection and narrative. It offers insights into a radically different cultural and political ecology, into a grammar in which subjects and objects are not hierarchized. It is rather a network of relationships swinging back and forth in a fluid space."

13 Pink Floyd 1973, https://genius.com/Pink-floyd-brain-damage-lyrics

14 Jean-Luc Nancy in June 2013 during our conference at Kommunales Kino Freiburg https://www.metaspace.de/Main/MbodyNancy

6. Bruno Latour, already terminally ill but with a smile on his face: "Ghosts are not an object of belief. It is something which comes to you."[15]
7. In the topological thinking of Michel Serres, the cuts of our diffractive approach can be considered as bridges. As a mathematician, sailor, and philosopher, Serres distinguishes the general theory of routes and paths from the comprehensive theory of flow.[16]
8. The straight line can be seen as an overpowering form of order in which the world, which tends towards the disparate, converges and can be synthesized into a whole. But what if the rationalist formalism of the straight line actually proves to be grossly irrational and dysfunctional for planetary life?

Basic trust originates from the uterus



Source: Daniel Fetzner

9. Rivers can be viewed from very different perspectives: As grooves in the landscape, the veins of a water system, the arteries of a biological habitat. The first image suggests that a river is primarily a drainage channel for the water and the

15 Fetzner 2019.

16 Serres (1977): "Who can fail to see that a flow never remains parallel for long, who can fail to see that a laminar flow is only ideal and theoretical? Turbulence soon appears. In relation to theory, the appearance of concrete experience is simultaneous with that of vortices. Declination is their beginning. Nothing is absurd here, everything is exact, precise and even necessary." (author's translation)

sediments it carries. The second image emphasizes that a river and its banks are not separated from its watershed. The third picture assumes that rivers provide a biological space that is inhabited by fish, snails, birds, trees, and humans alike.

10. The Murg flows into the Rhine, which has been meandering through the plain of its rift valley for 40 million years, flooding regularly, its boundaries in flux. In 1850, the engineer Johann-Gottfried Tulla drained the tributaries and directed the river into a straight line. By forcing the meander into linearity, he shortened the route between Basel and Bingen by 80 kilometers.
11. At the same time, BASF, Bayer, and Hoechst were founded next to the straightened river. In their chemical taxonomy, water is considered as H_2O. Ghosts and folds[17] are abandoned in favor of instrumental reason.
12. Michel Serres (1992, 51) doubted this concept: "Given normal weather, the Nile's floods submerged the borders of tillable fields in the alluvial valley fertilized by the great river. Floods take the world back to disorder, to primal chaos, to time zero, right back to nature, in the sense of things about to be born."
13. The project "Rendering a River" by the artist Michael Aschauer[18] follows the Danube in a linear movement from its source to the black sea. The seamless movement across borders unveils the absurdity of national characterizations of rivers like those by Bedřich Smetana and Richard Wagner.
14. Bob Dylan: "The water is wide and I can't cross over."
15. Within the research project Clim'Ability Care,[19] we observe instances of flooding and drought on the River Murg as agential cuts. Another one of these cuts is the massive earthworks and excavations for a pumped storage power station between the Schwarzenbach Dam and a water retention basin on the Murg river.
16. In our exploratory movement, we are inspired by the land art practitioner Robert Smithson (1968, 82): "One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason."
17. We add soil from our Earth Lab at the IISc Bangalore[20] and water from the performance *Nile Vodoo* to our probe.
18. We consider the River Murg as a hyperobject (Morton 2013) embedded in an Ecology without nature.[21]

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17 According to Gilles Deleuze (1988), the fold offers a way to analyze and conceptualize thinking through the lens of three integrated operations: explication, implication, and complication.

18 https://danubepanorama.art

19 https://www.clim-ability.eu/en/welcome

20 https://deglobalize.com/idoc/#SCIENCING_ZONE

21 https://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/156375/subscendence

19. Alongside "the parasite", we also make use of the idea of a "wild topology". Michel Serres understands this to refer to not only structural crossings, but ultimately all forms of mediating third parties between things, as the transgression of a boundary that, at the same time, preserves it.
20. The intermediate is central to the "wild topology": Hermes, parasites, angels, the labyrinth and, last but not least, the Northwest Passage, are therefore based on the ambivalence of connecting and disconnecting.
21. In Forbach, a local energy provider blasts a new pumped storage power plant into the granite next to the River Murg. Kilometers of pipes and a turbine power plant are to be built in the belly of the mountain. The hypertrophic project seems to come straight from a James Bond movie.

Male Fantasies: final preparations for the blasting

Source: Adrian Schwartz

22. Another agential cut is my father, who spend his whole life close to the river. He is an old man who is now falling into mental confusion.
23. Gaia seems to be a topological manifoldness.
24. Perception is primarily polymorphic. The topological space creates a milieu in which relations of proximity and envelopment become possible. Ecological thinkers such as von Uexküll (2010), Guattari (2014), and Ingold (2015) have established the mesh as a central structure in their relational thinking: Like the tracing of a wasp, thoughts must constantly cross, fold, and cut the chaos.

25. We developed an interactive stereographic projection that we use like an instrument in our improvisational performances. The images and sounds generated in this way undermine our usual perception and the anthropocentrism of linear perspective that is inherent in all our technical apparatuses. Following Graham Harman's call for flat ontologies (2016), we move on the thin ice of a critical (image) zone.

The probe on location equipped with Indian soil and Nile water

Source: Adrian Schwartz

26. The interaction and handling of a projected sphere narrows the experience of time and activates specific sensorimotor schemata. This projection within the application can be seen as a virtual eyeball. Seeing becomes less of an intentional act than a psycho-material entanglement of partially embodied affects. This is the actual qualitative leap of this visual representation. The tool recognizes that our body and its environment are always interwoven into multiple zones and indistinguishable intervals.
27. Navigation through our multimodal application can be seen as an improvisational act within an inter-objective structure. Each chosen perspective implicitly creates an off-screen and thus a potential space of diverse object-related connections and arbitrary montages. These relationships are imperceptibly effective, but not evident. They literally fall out of the frame. Rhythms, atmospheres, and coincidences thus create a polymorphous flow of experiences and a correlating

data stream that follows Erwin Panofsky's critique (1927) in questioning the concept of the central perspective as a symbolic and representative form.

28. According to Michel Serres (1980) a mediate system always implies noise, interruptions and lost signals. Positions, roles and controls are changing permanently. The parasite keeps any system in an ever-disruptive state. It is included and excluded in the system at the same time.[22]

Father Moser with cables and Jacob's Ladder blesses the site before the explosion.

Source: Adrian Schwartz

29. Watching the flow from the bank is just one way to look at it. Deleuze & Guattari (1987, 372) divide the flow of matter into strata: "Reproducing implies the permanence of a fixed point of view that is external to what is reproduced."
30. In the summer of 1990, I built a sculpture out of flotsam[23] on an old NVA[24] military training area at the Baltic Sea. Part of it was a piece of wood with a bullet lodged in it. The copper-colored foreign body has remained there ever since.

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22 "The joker, in the position of bifurcation, makes it possible by the confluence of values that it insures. It is both what has been said and what will be said. It is bi-, tri-, or poly-valent, according to the complexity of the connection. The ramification of the network depends on the number of jokers. But I suspect that there is a limit for this number. When there are too many, we are lost as if in a labyrinth." Serres 1980, 162.

23 German experts also use the onomatopoeic term "*Geschwemmsel*" (floating debris).

24 The NVA (Nationale Volksarmee, engl.: National People's Army) was the German Democratic Republic's armed forces.

Gardener Klumpp cooling down: no man ever steps in the same river twice

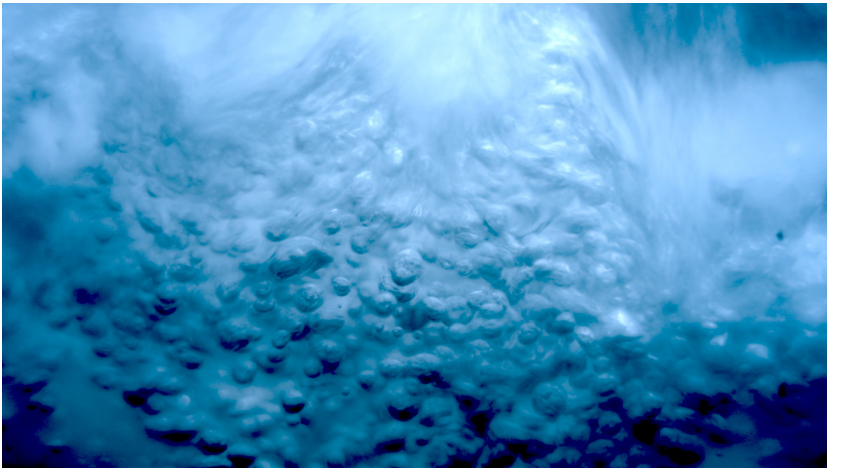
Source: Adrian Schwartz

31. One node is the property of Mr. Klumpp between the river and the B462 federal highway. A professional gardener, Klumpp has built greenhouses with parrots close to the Murg. As the water level rises, he is getting nervous. Mr. Klumpp has just recovered from cancer.
32. The topology of the interactive documentation can be considered as a meshwork, which creates entanglements within the individual media documents as well as with the visitor's thinking. Patterns of use take fragments and leftovers from the existing set of documents in order to build a new meaningful construct. This is not first and foremost about truth but about thinking.
33. From Heraclitus's perspective (500 v. Chr.) the river has a measurable before and after in a temporal dimension. The ancient thinker deals with the natural process of constant becoming and change and uses the river as a central metaphor of an ongoing metabolism and change of form. Hence: "No man ever steps in the same river twice".
34. In 1972, Christopher Stone (2010) insisted that the current division of the legal world into persons and things is neither self-evidently correct nor good for humanity. In 2017, New Zealand granted the Whanganui River its own rights. As the relevant legal document states: "Te Awa Tupua is an indivisible and living whole, comprising the Whanganui River from the mountains to the sea, incorporating all its physical and metaphysical elements."[25]

25 https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2017/0007/latest/whole.html

35. The Sanskrit word "*sindhu*" stands for ubiquitous wetness of the southwest monsoon. The meaning of *sindhu* ranges from the monsoon raindrop to the ocean. Wetness is everywhere, which is another way to think of the part being greater than the whole (Mathur & Cunha 2020). With the monsoon, the air thickens and the soil saturates, which increases the tempo of life and death. This can be applied to clouds, forests, and cellular matters.
36. Another source of relief is Alexander Kluge's speculation (2001, 44) about the rivers within our bodies: "We have a longing for the ancient oceans, which had a temperature of 37 degrees. The separation of inside and outside begins with this same water, from whose memory we have become warm-blooded creatures. Basic trust originates from the uterus, from the water, and will eventually drink from the river. We still carry the primordial oceans within us; the kidney carries its salt concentration. We have a capacity for long memory; these are our feelings. They are bearers of memory, quanta of the old world, for which a happy state 14 million years ago is therefore still present." (author's translation)
37. We regard the river Murg as such an organism, as a diffractive universe. Its surface is our seam.

Any bubble is a fold of a diffractive universe



Source: Adrian Schwartz

38. At high tide in January, the probe was caught by the main current, accelerated and finally disappeared. After a desperate search, we were lucky to locate it, thanks to its built-in spotlight, downstream in a bush on the dark north bank.

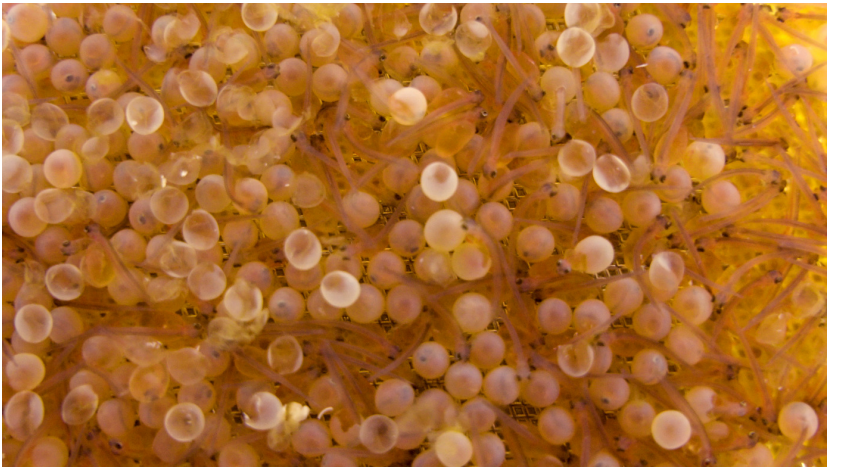
The artefact could be recovered with the help of a canoeist. This was another lesson in the matter of coincidence.

39. The accelerationist Nick Land (2014) speculates about organs that crawl like aphids upon the immobile motor of becoming. We are going to follow this trail.

Commentaries by Adrian Schwartz, filmmaker:

Water becomes river when it accumulates. Stone becomes river when it sediments. Movement becomes river when it is rehearsed and repressed into the unconscious, directing the limbs. Thoughts become river when they take on a life of their own, escape from the mind's supervision. Love becomes river when two unite by disputing unity, only to find each other again. Time becomes river when it passes unnoticed. Life becomes river when it is dedicated. Memories become river when they are evoked deep in the unconscious. Animal becomes river when it hunts, preys, and tears apart.

Becoming River – European Grayling



Source: Adrian Schwartz

In *Becoming River* we use the camera and the microphone as sensory instruments to translate the physical sensation into moving images and sounds. We distinguish between two types of gaze.

1. The gaze upon it

The film camera is mesmerized by the flow velocities. The more perpendicular the view from above, the more direct the shot, the more compelling the flow of water. The immediacy of the fixated confrontation with the flowing current makes the viewer dizzy. A strong current speaks not only in, but also through the image. An eerie suction force is created. Viewers cannot look at it for long. What is this flowing water all about? The film camera intervenes, providing orientation. It lingers on amphibious boulders, roots that entwine in the water, or a tentative contour, the shadow cast by a power cable high above the surface of the water, the reflection of the branches of a tree on the riverbank. It aims at something that gives the human eye a foothold. In relation to the contour of an object, we observe the speed of the flow harmlessly, almost devoutly, peacefully, lullingly. It is easy for viewers to concentrate on the aesthetics of the shot. They judge. But when the film camera is once again directed at the barren stream of water, close enough, perpendicular enough, without holding contours, without any possibility of orientation, then the laws of aesthetics blur before their eyes and the desire for a formal discussion dries up. Then only the suction force of the water speaks from the picture, showing an unruliness that makes the viewer feel uneasy. Even the smallest river then becomes an audiovisual challenge by which the viewers feel threatened and soon turn away, guided by the tolerance of their physical constitution. The film camera can introduce us to the essence of the river, but we have to deal with the incompatibility ourselves.

Therefore we need the guidance of an observational camera that is able to engage with the events and imitate the modality of a focused, steady gaze. What is needed even more, however, is an effective sound pattern that initiates the directness of the confrontation with the world and holds the gaze transfixed. The ear, as a much more sensitive, one could even say smarter organ, knows how to distinguish between the unimportant and the important. It has the task of guiding the gaze, which in turn means that the ear must be explicitly considered in the film. A detailed sound design interested in precision, which is shaped by the effects of amplification, isolation and repetition, is therefore particularly helpful in favoring the uniqueness of discovery in its physicality.

2. The gaze out of it

In order to counteract the effectiveness of the filmic participation by means of the participation itself, the sensory instruments – camera and microphone – become flotsam themselves. They drift, get tangled up, spin, and get stuck. They whirl, speed up, slow down, and rotate around every conceivable axis of their own bodies. A camera can take on the perspective of a washed-up scrap of fabric hanging from a branch. The microphone can be washed through the raging rapids and plunge into the dredged channels of the tributaries. The camera switches between above and below the water. Both the camera and the microphone must therefore participate

in the nature of the subjects. They need to physically perform the participation (artificially) in order to get closer to a being itself. The focus is on the ongoing processes that can be observed from "the gaze upon it", such as the drifting of the water, the swaying of plants in the wind, the breaking and falling of stones, etc., which are then imitated in the "the gaze out of it". This is made possible by a bare camera that refuses to obey the aesthetic laws of composition. No disturbing noise, no visual flaw can be overlooked. The camera falls, wriggles, dips, and lurches and is thereby in a constant performative state that can ultimately only be limited by the editing, where it is combined with the gaze upon it to allow the phenomena to be approached.

Unlike the perception of reality, the perception of film means a narrowing of perception to the image on offer. The gaze is channeled and captured in the aspect ratio. The ear is seduced by the sound of the film. However, the physical limits of the cinema are by no means the limits of participation, because the space on the screen can and will expand through our imagination. We understand more of what is shown than is actually shown. We imagine a world that trumps the physical state of the film projection. We generate a psychological space of experience through the sensory perceptibility of the world through cinema. It is a physical coming to the world in the transformation of the mental made possible by film. This moment of confrontation with the being of the world in film is the subject of the search of our exploratory gaze in *Becoming River*. A throwback to our own physicality before the dawn of imagination and reflection, a merging with the filmic witnessing of the river and of life within, around, and throughout.

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