Living Water, living with lively waters (part 2)

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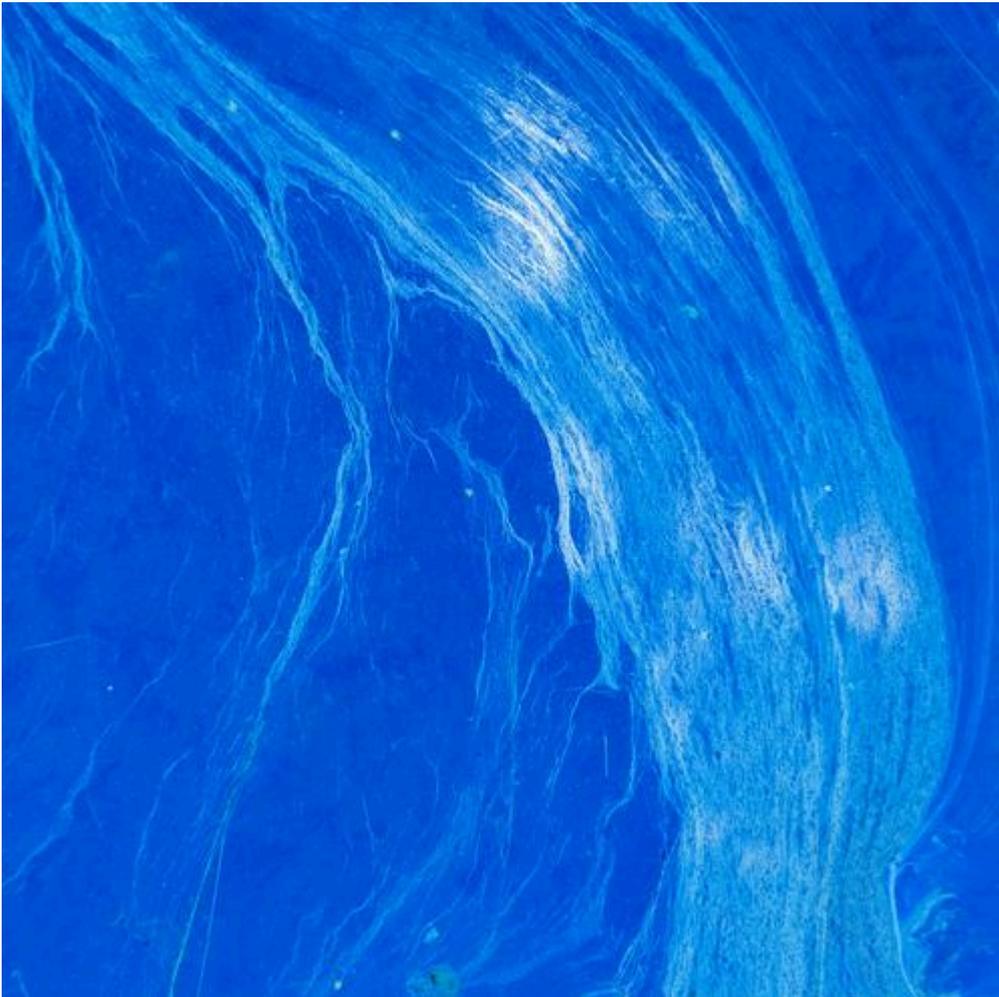
In *What is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction,* geographer Jamie Linton (2010: 14) describes "modern water" as the following: "an abstract, isomorphic, measurable quantity that may be reduced to its fundamental unit – a molecule of H2O". Ethnographers have increasingly taken their cue from such framings to foreground how modern water is but one among numerous possibilities, for

instance by attending to the relational work involved in sustaining pressure, flow, and measurability (Anand 2017; Ballestero 2019; Barnes 2014; Stensrud 2016).

Philosopher Ivan Illich foreshadowed these studies in his eloquent 1986 book *H2O & the Waters of Forgetfulness*. He noted how "not only does the way an epoch treat water and space have a history: the very substances that are shaped by the imagination – and thereby given explicit meanings – are themselves social creations to some degree" (Illich 1986: 4). It is tempting to read this as a statement about water's susceptibility to take on multiple meanings. Yet, Illich moves beyond perspectivalism. His invocation of historical variability concerns the very "stuff" of water. Dealing primarily with urbanization in Euro-American settings, he shows how different urban environments yielded disparate waters. Concomitant with successive infrastructural transformations was the emergence of H2O as a scarce resource requiring technical management. Andrea Ballestero (2019: 15) makes a related point in her book *A Future History of Water*. A given water body, she explains, "is always a technopolitical entity." Far from given, it is the result of "scientific word and measurement," including "[l]egal and economic forms of knowing."

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Perhaps a symptom of my unfamiliarity with multimodal methods, and/or maybe due to my shallow understanding of the socio-political context surrounding Pavel Borecký's sonically and visually stunning documentary film, I could not help but watch *Living Water* with the aforementioned works as my north. Contrary to Goeffrey Hughes, I did not attend to the film with expectations about a total account of the post-colonial political context through which water scarcity is made to emerge in Jordan. Rather, informed by authors who aim to push beyond assumptions about the other-than-human as passive resource for human contestation and management, I saw the film as an exploration of how modern

singularity never quite reaches closure; a multimodal inquiry into the multiplicities that remain below the radar, despite efforts to choreograph such complexities away. I asked: what might *Living Water* bring to ongoing discussions about the ontological politics of environmental relations? What can the atmospheric affordances of multimodality do that textual accounts cannot?

I am tempted to pick up where the film ends, with the voice of Erga Rehns, an archaeologist who has lived in the village of Wadi Rum for some 23 years. She says:

I think people are caught in a trap. They don't truly see the world around them. If human beings would care more outside of what they have been told to care about, maybe the planet wouldn't be in so much trouble.

Like Hughes, I too am inclined to interpret this in light of Donna Haraway's work. Yet I do so not with an understanding of the latter's primary agenda as one of delegating responsibility for environmental calamity. Nor do I understand Borecký's film as blaming "humanity" – or any other, more narrowly defined group of actors for that matter. Something more original is going on in both *Living Water* and Haraway's work. For me, Rehns's closing remarks epitomise *Living Water*'s underlying call for "response-ability" (Haraway 2017); that is, the cultivation of an ability to respond to and care for the "multiple water worlds" that defy silencing (Yates et al. 2017). This requires that we think beyond the singularizations assumed by the resource-trope: a modern "trap" – to invoke Rehns's metaphor – often granted trespass in anthropological analyses.

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Rehns's voiceover helps to circumvent such pitfalls. Appearing in various parts of the film, the archaeologist poetically narrates how she followed dried-out rivers in the Wadi Rum desert, and how what comes across as something of a semi-

improvised method for archaeological inquiry led her to fossilized plants, shells, and sweet water turtles. "So imagine if the rivers appeared and the sweet water turtle would come back," she then says, signalling the landscape's prevailing, immanent potentialities for water-futures yet-to-come. The many reminiscences of a past when water was other than a (scarce) resource seem to suggest that such a future is what many of Borecký's Bedouin interlocutors in Wadi Rum are hoping for.

Perhaps inspired by Rehns, Borecký holds on to such alternative water-futures, allowing them to haunt his journey across the various settings drawn together and reconfigured by the deep "fossil water" of the Disi aquifer – from Wadi Rum to a water station for Aqaba city 15 kilometres away, on to Aqaba itself, dispossessed farmers in Mudawwara, and Amman, among other places. Accompanying him on this voyage, we get a sense of how throughout the disputes between water authorities and the Bedouin, water becomes enacted as a resource to be managed, albeit continuously nudged by allusions to other, enduringly latent water-practices.

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The film's title gains at least two different meanings. On the one hand, *Living Water* tells of a recalcitrant, vital force that through its absence and flow may put an end to life. This is the liveliness of water. Immediately following one of Rehns's snippets, the cracking sounds of dry branches reverberate this notion persuasively. But water's animacy is also expressed through footage from news broadcasts relaying how flash floods sweep away parts of a village. This captures another central theme: the social challenges yielded by climate change and ensuing oscillations between scarcity and overflow. On the other hand, water is the condition of possibility for more-than-human sociality and life. Water is lived with and through. The affective capacities of the film medium are especially apt for portraying the fragility of such conditions: vivid village soundscapes combined

with shots of water pipes and complaints about insufficient pressure, followed by panoramic images of a small, illuminated desert village surrounded by ominous mountains and a starry sky.

These are the diverse waters that enactments of modern water claim to successfully displace. Such assertions assume different forms: fences around humming water stations, a mobile camera inspecting a well, and the use of instruments for detecting illicit connections. A 3-D model of the Disi aquifer, accompanied by a voice explaining the risks posed by unsustainable consumption, signals how such choreographing might happen through well-minded educational efforts to promote wiser water management. Even so, the liveliness of water seeps into modern arrangements too, regardless of efforts to sustain predictability. We get a sense of this from functionaries' references to residents tweaking and tinkering with pipes, modifying them towards their own respective ends.

In closing, let me return to Rehns's concluding remarks about people being caught in a trap, and try to convey what I deem to be the potentialities of Borecký's film by tapping into and pushing this metaphor further. In a piece that forms part of his more extensive work on entrapment as a heuristic of social process, Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2018: 56) contends that "modern knowledge is essentially a trap to itself, such that most forms of 'explanation' are guests unaware they are actually being hosted – predators who do not know their own condition as prey." Accordingly, if people are caught in a trap, as per Rehns's comments, then that very same trap is also the way out. For Corsín Jiménez, the trick is to come up with a mode of description that "aims to make the modern production of knowledge face up to the conditions of its own predation" (57), offering a sort of mirror that may body forth modern epistemology's recursive self-implosion.

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While Borecký's documentary film might fail to provide a full picture of the larger processes that generate ecological contradictions in the first place, what *Living Water* does accomplish is an evocation of the tensions that impede ontological closure. Through the aesthetic affordances of multimodality, Borecký brings water's liveliness to bear upon the viewer vicariously, thus hinting at how modern singularization harbours that which it designates as its other. The result is a film that evades the trope of total explanation. Instead, *Living Water* stays with the trouble by intimating alternative water-futures to be "trapped out" (65) from prevailing disjunctures – those that modern configurations resolutely deny but can never really do without.

This is the second article of a two-part symposium on Living Waters, the first of which was written by Geoffrey Hughes. You can also find out more about the film on its website.

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