

Seeing the World Through Glass: Time and Extinction in Fiona Tan's *Depot* (2015)

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Abstract

These times of mass extinctions ask for different temporalities than rationalized, linear time, to become in synch with them. *Depot* (2015) is a film installation by Indonesian-Australian artist Fiona Tan showcasing endangered and extinct marine animals that are preserved in jars, taxidermied or parts of skeletons in the natural history museums of Leiden and Berlin. I argue that through cinematic techniques such as stilled images, (extreme) close-ups, framing and a poetic voice-over recounting memories of marine animals, these specimens are given duration. Through this, *Depot* scrutinizes narratives of Western science and imperialism tied to linear time and progress perpetuated by natural history museums. The scientific and objective status of the natural history museum and its extraction histories is not only criticized, but its histories are also acknowledged, lamented and reframed. As such, *Depot* offers a decolonising extinction temporality as well as a new ocean imaginary that opposes ideas of ocean life as abundant frontier. I argue that *Depot* questions the mechanisms of science and time that determine how we see ourselves as humans and our place in the nonhuman world.

Keywords: cinema, time, extinction, video installation, ocean imaginary, natural history museum, *Depot*, non-linearity, decolonisation.

Resumen

Estos tiempos de extinciones masivas piden temporalidades diferentes al tiempo racionalizado, lineal, para sincronizarse con ellas. *Depot* (2015) es una instalación cinematográfica de la artista indonesia-australiana Fiona Tan que muestra animales marinos en peligro de extinción y extintos que se conservan en frascos, disecados o partes de esqueletos en los museos de historia natural de Leiden y Berlín. Sostengo que, a través de técnicas cinematográficas como imágenes fijas, primeros planos (extremos), encuadres y un doblaje poético que narra recuerdos de animales marinos, se les da duración a estos especímenes. A través de esto, *Depot* escudriña las narrativas de la ciencia occidental y el imperialismo ligadas al tiempo lineal y el progreso perpetuado por los museos de historia natural. No solo se critica el estatus científico y objetivo del museo de historia natural y sus historias de extracción, sino que también se reconocen, lamentan y reformulan sus historias. Como tal, *Depot* ofrece una temporalidad de extinción descolonizadora, así como un nuevo imaginario oceánico que se opone a las ideas de la vida oceánica como frontera abundante. También argumento que *Depot* cuestiona los mecanismos de la ciencia y el tiempo que determinan cómo nos vemos a nosotros mismos como humanos y nuestro lugar en el mundo no humano.

Palabras clave: cine, tiempo, extinción, instalación cinematográfica, imaginario oceánico, museo de historia natural, *Depot*, no linealidad, descolonización.

Introduction

The public, visiting the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art at Gateshead in the UK in 2015 for Fiona Tan's exhibition *Depot*, was in for a surprise.¹ The exhibition filled two floor levels with monumental projections and a 76 foot long lorry. The Level 3 Gallery showed installations questioning the very idea of a collection, who controls these processes and the power structures they reflect and produce, and how the choice of film format affects the public's interpretation of collections. The big surprise, though, was on the Level 4 gallery, where the exhibition drew thematically on Newcastle's history as major whaling port in the 18th and 19th century. The enormous trailer, on the outside provided with the text *The Giant Whale "Jonah"*, was rebuilt by Tan, referencing the historical lorry that travelled throughout Europe from the 1950's to 1970's with a preserved fin whale, called Jonah. Instead of entering the inside of a dead whale, the public entered a natural history museum in its own right, an exhibition within an exhibition. On display were whales in old photos, cabinets filled with narwhal tusks, glass sea creatures by Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka (circa 1870) and sea anemones in glass jars.

There was also a film installation called *Depot* (2015, 22 minutes and 40 seconds), commissioned by the BALTIC, containing footage of so called 'wet collections': preserved marine species in glass jars, next to different scales of (incomplete) marine animal skeletons. The wet collections in *Depot* mostly originate from the natural history museum Naturalis Biodiversity Center (Leiden), but also some from the Museum für Naturkunde (Berlin). Outside the trailer, another film installation could be viewed, also commissioned by the BALTIC, *Leviathan* (2015, 4 minutes and 30 seconds), based on archival footage from the early 20th century, from the EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. This film depicts the stripping of a whale, the name *Leviathan* obviously referring to the sea monster in the Old Testament.

In this article I will focus on the film installation *Depot*. Following what *Depot* mediates, rather than testing the artwork against in advance formulated theories, I argue that through Tan's choice of subjects, medium and formal techniques, time is centralised. *Depot* visualizes heterogeneous extinction temporalities, producing duration, and by doing so, is opening up an experience of time and extinction that differs from linear and progressive clock time. Through slow filming—tracking shots, framing, medium, regular and extreme close-ups—as well as sound editing and the use of a voice-over of the narrator who recounts a man's memories and associations with the ocean and several aquatic animals, specimens seemingly are coming to life.

Secondly, I argue that these techniques offer an alternative view on aquatic animals, other than traditional ocean imaginaries as criticised in the Blue Humanities (Ratté, Rozwadowski, Steinberg, Yaeger) in which they are presented as hidden and anonymous masses, dehistoricized along with their environment, the sea. Instead, Tan gives them singularity, while referencing the loss of human-animal histories

¹ The exposition lasted from 9 July until 1 November, 2015.

through subsequent extinctions that gives both aquatic animals and the ocean a temporality deflecting their dehistoricization. *Depot* embeds them in situated, but comparatively largely understudied by the natural sciences and therefore unknown ecosystem endangerment and extinctions, in stark contrast to terrestrial megafauna extinction. The preserved, sometimes (almost) extinct animals, now only exist in the memory of the voice-over. This singular and temporal view on ocean life impacts how we look at specimens in natural history museums, and their relation to extinction.

Finally, I argue that *Depot's* visualization of a non-linear, heterogeneous temporality produces a possible decolonizing aspect. The conception of time as linear and progressive arguably reflects the imperial and capitalist origins of global time synchronisation in the 19th century, in which both photography and cinema were important tools to spread this ideology of 'imperial temporality' (Azoulay). *Depot* therefore balances a tightrope between reproducing and reinventing an aquatic colonial extinction narrative, both in terms of medium specificity, as well as its subject choice of natural history museum collections. Museums and zoos documenting the loot of colonial expansion through new archival technologies such as photography and cinema to supplement human vision have been implicated in this process since their production. I argue that *Depot* engages with history and memory as part of colonialism through the criticism of imperial temporality and the production of heterogeneous temporalities.

Extinction as concept and materially unfolding event is intricately linked to time: its conceptualisations depend on constructions and boundaries placed on or removed from the past, the present and the anticipated future. In extinction studies, time and temporality have been linked in various ways to extinction: extinction is conceptualised as intergenerational, meaning that extinction is a process of disrupted sociocultural relations, instead of a singular event (Chrulew et al.); extinction is conceived of as something of the past, present and future: our present views of the past affect visions of the future, mostly in terms of conservation (Jørgenson). This means that extinction is conceived of as non-linear but transgressive, as something of the past, present and future.

This reframing of extinction as non-linear is important, since linear time is unable to appropriately engage with extinction and climate change. Therefore, philosopher Michelle Bastian pleads for the rethinking of telling time: away from linearity and towards ways of coordinating actions to the world (24). She argues that our current paradigm of telling time does not represent the urgency of environmental changes, but instead emphasises continuity and similarity across all moments, projecting an empty and unending future (33). According to Bastian, we need 'new clocks', to be able to be in synch with environmental catastrophes: countercurrents that envision and emphasise alternative ways of being in time. Such new devices are necessary to intervene and transform our understandings and experiences of relationality (37). This entails a shift towards heterogeneity and relationality, emphasising other virtual and potential currents that are actualising in the periphery of the present. I propose and analyse *Depot* to be such a 'new clock'.

Depot: Preservation and Stillness

Depot opens with a medium close-up of a jar containing a preserved coral with a tag by Naturalis, amidst other jars of different sizes. The viewer therefore assumes that the setting is Naturalis' depot. The stilled image lasts eight seconds, accompanied by slight background noise, seemingly produced by lamps and environment controlling technologies, confirming the suspicion of the setting. The camera then cuts to another medium close-up of jars of different sizes. As no jar is centralised in the shot, the viewer is able to identify part of an octopus leg and part of a crustacean, but taxonomic tags are out of sight. This stilled image also lasts for eight seconds. Another cut follows, to a medium close-up of jars of different sizes, but identification is obscured through dark lighting, except for one jar containing a giant tiger shrimp. After eight seconds of this stilled image, the video cuts to a close-up of part of a jar containing a horseshoe crab, while other jars are blurred from vision. After four seconds, there is a cut to a stilled close-up of a jar with part of an octopus, stuck to the inside of the jar, making the suction cups visible.

At thirty seconds, the male voice-over starts: "He enters the storage room. In the corner he finds a notebook. He opens it to the first page. Seastar, sealily, seabiscuit, seacucumber, seahorse, sealion, seaunicorn, seacow, seadragon." During this meditative recitation by the actor who remains off-camera during the whole film, the camera cuts to a close-up of blurred jars with coral; a stilled image lasting for almost twenty seconds before cutting to an extreme close-up of a jar filled with sea stars, again a stilled image that lasts for almost fifteen seconds. This sequence of stilled images, which appear to be photographs, is disrupted by a medium close-up of jars showing a hand holding a smaller jar with a baby turtle, placing this in front of the others. The baby turtle moves inside of the jar for a few seconds, but the image becomes still when the specimen inside no longer moves due to the intervention.

The first ninety seconds are indicative of the tension between stillness and movement in *Depot*, which for a large part consists of stilled/delayed images of marine animals in formaldehyde and alcohol jars, lasting for several seconds. This produces two things. Firstly, it plays with the ontological question of film, in its apparent distinction from photography, moving between the stillness of the photograph and the movement of the film as a whole. Secondly, it creates the visual analogy of cinema as preservation/taxidermy and preservation/taxidermy as cinema. According to film theorist Mary Ann Doane, the difference between photography and film has historically been the difference between fixing a moment by photography and producing a record of time by cinema, the latter making duration archivable (22). Contrary to photography, film creates the illusion of movement, eliminating the stillness of photography associated with death (Barthes). Photography is an instant production of history of the moment, killing the present, and typified as violent act of detachment from relations beyond the frame.

This tension of the still photograph—‘killing’ the present to freeze a moment for eternity—relates it both materially and thematically to the natural history museum and its practice of preservation/taxidermy for display or research. Like the photograph, which mechanically preserves a moment of life stopped and held in perpetuity, the preserved animal is embalmed in time and becomes a marker for both their species and endangerment or extinction history. This practice disguises that animals are extracted, dehistoricized and systematized into a seemingly neutral taxonomy, actually functioning as part of imperial ideology (Huggan 46). The assembled jars in *Depot* read as ‘this was now’, as its mode of display in the natural history museum relies on the petrification of the animal body with a mimesis of livingness. Using film to record preserved animals, a doubling of recording/stilling of reality and its bodies is created.

In producing animal death by embalming, subjects become both scientific and aesthetic objects. This tension between objectification and aestheticism is also present in *Depot*, yet I find it an example of how taxidermy as specimen of ‘pure nature’ or scientific objectivity is folded by representing it through another visual form. By using preserved animals as subjects, Tan visually investigates the way in which cinema reanimates both the dead and the living and examines the indiscernible boundary between the two. As film theorist Laura Mulvey, argues, the dead merge with the living and movement merges with stillness when cinema projects dead bodies (101). By using the stilled image, or the freeze-frame, duration is imposed on these animals that were and are preserved as objects to be stored and frozen in time, through which the natural rotting process is—seemingly—eternally halted, similar to the photographic image.

Art historian Hanneke Grootenboer calls Tan’s technique which produces stillness as motion the ‘filmed photograph’ or ‘stilled film’, comparing it to a painting set in motion (27). This hybridity of stillness and motion in Tan’s work arguably creates a new modality inviting the viewer not to interpret but to think. Thus pensiveness can be situated in the context of cinema as a form of thinking. According to Mulvey, this produces a ‘pensive spectator’ who can reflect on the cinema, as pensive images show the past-ness of film and the inseparability of stillness from movement and flow, blending different kinds of time by stretching the images into new dimensions of time and space (195). Through the arrested image, cinematographic time is stopped and the past of the photograph is blended with the present of the cinema. I argue that *Depot* creates pensive images, which invite experiences of time through stillness as motion. Through this, I believe *Depot* envisions alternative extinction temporalities.

The stilled image producing a pensive image/spectator creates a new clock as alternative to rationalized clock time and its structuring ideology. In pensive images, the pensive spectator is able to see the presence of the past. It invites viewers to see the specimens as outside of assigned eternal representation, as temporal creatures, even in death. Through duration and time reorientation, the specimens refer not only to a former time or history, but move within time. *Depot*’s stilled images visualise

inorganic, past life with a continuing decaying presence, gesturing to the unknowability of that world, that thwarts the logic of action and linear narrative of these animals as new clock.

Depot: Singularity and Movement

By using tracking shots, Tan gives movement and duration to the specimens, and through careful framing, also gives them singularity. At two minutes, the first of many slow tracking shots of one of the marine animals appears. After the voice-over's list of aquatic animal categorisations, there is a halt before he says 'sea urchin', which has been prefaced by one stilled image of sea urchins. After twenty seconds of a close-up of these sea urchins, there is an extreme close-up of one of them. Whereas it is another seemingly stilled image, there is movement visible in the fluid: tiny dust particles floating around in the jar. This is again observed in the next shot, which is an extreme-close up of the spikes of a sea urchin, but then invisible in the next shot, which is an extreme close-up of the sea urchin's mouth. The viewer is left to question whether the earlier stilled images were truly that, or only seemingly, having watched movement as stillness. The focus on the details and different body parts of the aquatic animals—frequently showing their faces if they have them or other body parts, realising a form of intimacy between the viewer and viewed animals—gives them a form of subjectivity, without disavowing their deaths. These techniques question the eternal past in which these animals are placed as still and fixed.

After the stilled images of sea urchins, a slow and smooth tracking shot of them follows, resembling the movement of water. This shot of several seconds is disturbed by the second human hand we see in *Depot*, intervening in the meditative images. The hand cleans the outside of a jar, containing a crab, with a cloth, spinning the jar around to be able to do so, with a soft sound of falling rain accompanying the background audio track. The camera cuts to an extreme close-up of the top of the jar, revealing crab legs and the liquid surface. The ripples in the surface of the fluid, caused by human movement, create an effect as if moving in an oceanic environment outside of the depot. The camera slowly moves in a downward spiral around the jar, revealing two crabs stacked together below the liquid surface. This visually invites the contemplation of unknown life beyond the surface of the water.

Aside from tracking shots of individual specimens—mostly moving horizontally, sometimes vertically—there are several tracking shots of both assembled jars and of taxidermied fish and skeletons arranged from small to big in the storage room. These are mostly medium shots, their tags unreadable, and as they are assembled together, not all bodies are wholly inside the frame. Unlike what a viewer might expect from a depot, the lighting in these shots obscures parts of the frame. This creates the illusion of travelling down deeper sea depths which disables the viewer to fully identify the framed animals. This is an alienating experience as the viewer is accustomed to the camera serving a surveilling/recording purpose—especially in nature and wildlife documentaries—by projecting light and enforcing

proximity with the intent of knowability. In the context of the natural history museum, literary scholar Dominic O'Key illuminatingly calls this mode of human-animal gaze mediation the fixity of the anthroponormative gaze (643).

Neither of the used techniques provides an overview shot, instead Tan uses (extreme) close-ups, mostly face-level and low angles, combined with obscure lighting. This point of view visually undermines the hierarchical relation between the viewer and viewed. It implicates that the specimens, as part of an archive, visually escape the viewer, resisting their possible placement into a totalising framework of knowledge. Additionally, inherent to the camera frame as opposed to the frame of a painting, the camera cuts from a larger field, which "implicitly acknowledges the existence of a larger world beyond the frame" (Butler 75). Thus, although the choice of medium is in danger of reinforcing visual animal objectification, it also aids the acknowledgement of lifeworlds of the specimens beyond the frame.

Through these cinematic techniques, Tan visually goes against ocean imaginaries and their visual language as reproduced by natural history museums, including their projections of ocean temporality as eternal and constant. Culturally, the sea functions as a trope of boundlessness, encouraging humans to treat it as an "inexhaustible storehouse of goods" (Yaeger 535). In terms of temporality, the ocean is popularly conceived of as eternal—past, present and future—and vast (Rozwadowski 521). Due to scale, the ocean is coded as impersonal, since knowledge of the ocean relies on technology because of its inaccessibility to humans, which as a result necessitates a disembodied experience of the examined object. This means that ocean temporality is perceived an antithesis to the linear progressive temporality on land. *Depot* reframes this ocean temporality through a focus on specimen movement and extinction, highlighting the material effects of maritime extraction of individual specimens, impacting species and ecosystems.

The imaginaries of the sea as eternal, lawless and boundless is harmful for several reasons. Firstly, it fails to incorporate non-human elements (Steinberg); and secondly, it enables destruction of the maritime industry with monetary instead of non-human interests (Yaeger). It also fails to include the ocean's changing natural, geological, evolutionary and environmental history, as humans are currently changing the structures of marine ecosystems through overfishing and climate change altering ocean chemistry (Rozwadowski). Although the ocean is viewed as a commons—a collectively owned space that serves both national and international interests—Yaeger states that maritime preservation and management is in the interest of capitalism (525). This has been recently re-emphasized through the High Seas Treaty (2023) that under the banner of biodiversity conservation prioritizes equal profits of genetic material resource extraction—both in the present and future—shared by the Global North and South.

Ocean imaginaries are historically and in the contemporary intertwined with capitalist and imperialist motives, motivated by the promise of abundance and extraction wealth of living and non-living resources. The 19th century motive for exploring the ocean and 'deep ocean' were not just scientific, but according to

Rozwadowski mostly political and economical, with the sea described as a largely unexplored 'frontier' (522). In the contemporary, technology that enables disembodied, distant seeing and surveilling is vital to the imperial expanding human control over the ocean. This involves underwater remote sensing and autonomous marine robots, "translating immense marine spaces into functional, measurable, or geographically specific knowledge", as expanding maps (Ratté 141, 144-45).

Iterating the ocean imaginary of abundance, the visibility of fish in wildlife documentaries has often led to the massification of fish on screen. According to film theorist Laura McMahon, this massification repeats a representational trope of animal life as an anonymous mass, which becomes almost abstract through the sheer abundance in fish representation. She flags this type of fish representation as a monstrous horde of anonymous animality to be tamed as harvestable biomass (147), which visually reproduces an indifference to fish as singular beings. McMahon's argument demonstrates the tension and difficulty in representing marine animals as worthy of life: either as unknown masses that remain unknown due to their invisibility, or as singular beings that are loved due to their high visibility. The latter risks an over-exposition in danger of anthropomorphism, repeating scientific thingification or producing individual fetishization as part of liberal ideology with commodification potential.

This tension of massification and singularity of marine animals, visualized through the camera, is one of the double binds of *Depot*: on the one hand, there is hardly any informational entry into the screened animals, due to which the marine animals in the film installation forego their status as harvestable biomass, in this case as knowledge objects. On the other hand, *Depot* nonetheless utilises dead animals that are filed, displayed and stored as natural history objects and therefore reproduces that status; the film is not wholly able to escape the massification volume and architecture of the depot. The historical and contemporary conception of the sea as bountiful resource of knowledge and goods is testified by the enormous size of the 'wet' collections in natural history museums, with marine animals of the same species frequently lumped together in jars. The jars in *Depot* continue to function as small ocean laboratories that objectify these animals.

Nonetheless, I argue that Tan is able to fold both the anthroponormative gaze and surveillance technology through framing of the specimens as singularities. Additionally, fetishization of the individual is folded due to the obscured framing and lighting of the animals, due to which they remain largely ungraspable. Individualism is also subverted through the continual cuts to medium shots in the film, with several animals in them that are mostly obscured, instead of focusing on one animal throughout the film. Through this framing, the camera does not invite an imperial projection of future imaginings onto the specimens, but examines the ruin of techno-capitalist-imperialist oceanic explorations. *Depot* shows the opposite of endless regeneration of marine animals and therefore provides a new imaginary with an anti-imperial gaze of the ocean.

Depot: Memory, the Archive and Temporality

So far, I have focused on marine animals and the duration and temporalities they are given through cinematic techniques by Tan. Although humans are hardly within the frame of the *Depot*, I argue that it thematizes human histories in several ways. As the ocean imaginaries and contemporary human-ocean relations that are identified in Blue Humanities scholarship demonstrate, humans are present through disembodiment and mediated technologies, and their traces in the form of pollution, climate change and mass extinction. It could be argued that Tan made a film installation about humans and their conceptions and objectification of aquatic animals and their habitats. With its off-screen voice-over, the video is related to the human experience of time, as the material registration of objects that are the visual companions of the voice-over measuring their enduring existence against the time of the human subject, functioning as what film theorist Alison Butler helpfully terms 'memory objects' (77).

In *Depot*, Butler's memory objects are preserved animals. Due to the materiality of preserved animals, they are evidence of human colonial histories of extermination, testimonials of the hunt for (now) endangered animals, in order to present and preserve them. *Depot* explicitly explores the place of humans in oceanic mass extinction through the voice-over, displacing the objectivity of the specimens. As film theorist Matilda Mroz states, sometimes there is a fluid relation between image and voice-over, but when there is not, it creates two temporal rhythms (3). In *Depot*, the voice-over adds another temporality to the durations already evoked, through both cultural and personal memory. Memory as temporality moves through all the tenses, destabilizing the linear clock to instead coordinating oneself to the world according to recounted embodiment and experience.

The voice-over is an aspect of the soundtrack associated with narrative (Garwood 102), and in *Depot*, the voice-over states the setting ("He enters the storage room"), the possible contextualization of the setting as physical and discursive archive (the notebook and alphabetical list of marine animals), which is juxtaposed by the voice-over's associations triggered by this list. Halting before pronouncing "Sea urchin", after a short pause he continues: "Like blind old warriors, they slowly and patiently transgress the ocean floor. As a child he once accidentally stood on one. Just like a hedgehog's, the spines were sharp as needles, but they were also brittle and snapped off, after lodging themselves underneath the skin." This digression brings out the tension in the video and its subject matter: the immersive experience of time through interventions of memory in perception that rubs against the chronological and eternal time that the natural history museum implies and enforces. The list and childhood memory produce a negotiation of the memory objects. The specimens are prepared for eternity, yet the camera and voice-over meander over these specimens as beings that participate(d) in a shared world that allows them to partly escape the time and space they are allocated in the museum. The viewer is offered an escape

from linear time into an experience of time and space that includes specimens beyond their taxonomical categorisation.

Although most parts of the video are unaccompanied by the voice-over, when there it provides an alternative narrative to the natural history museum information signs. As a child, the man used to dream about the sea and feel like “he could breathe there”; he used to go snorkelling with his father who wore spectacles under his suction cup, and once when he went snorkelling his legs got caught in kelp, he thought he would drown. Next to subjective memories, the narrator also offers cultural, collective memories of certain specimens across cultures that live(d) in proximity with those animals. He states: “The ancient Greeks called the paper nautilus the sailor of the sea”. After a pause, the narrator states not only the cultural name and some scientific information, but a personal experience with a paper nautilus: “he once found a whole one, perfect and glistening white, larger than his own hand”.

Another example of the cultural mark of one of the aquatic animals in the depot is that of the horseshoe crab: “There is something ancient and alien about horseshoe crabs. For the Japanese, they are reborn samurai warriors who sacrifice their lives in battle”. These parts of the voice-over stand in strong contrast with the acknowledged mediation in which he describes his current interaction with the world and these aquatic animals: “Glass. He realizes that he sees the world through glass. Grimy and mottled and tinted windows. The glass of his reading glasses, the looking-glass, the magnifying glass, the lens of the camera, these jars and files”. This description evokes not necessarily a disembodied mediation, but the sense of an inability to form a direct relation with the world and animals that world it. There is no direct access to these animals, but through older cultural narratives and a scientific framework, except for some of the recounted memories.

Although the voice-over script is poetic and avoids a straightforward narrative, the narrator does offer ruminations about why human-ocean relations have become increasingly fraught. Near the end of his voice-over he states: “Natural history came of age in the 19th century, the golden age of exploration and expedition, a time when maps lost all their blank spaces, time and space expanded. And together with all that forward thinking swelled the insatiable desire to amass, collect, to catalogue and collate, to measure and to circumscribe, to describe, to own, to conquer”. He hints at the role of capitalism in this disrupted relation, which has been part of human-ocean relations for so long that the voice-over does not specify but leaves the example of narwhal harvesting within the realm of myth: “The horn of a unicorn was worth more than gold. But such a horn was in fact the tusk of a narwhal, the unicorn of the sea. In powdered form, the tusk was prized as an antidote for poison and, indeed, for melancholy”. What is left after maritime extraction are these memory objects within the depot, making the link between photography/cinema and preservation/specimen explicit, almost in an attempt to time travel back: “He finds himself surrounded by these sad messages in bottles which he tries to read and interpret. Like photographs they speak first of death and only after that of what they once were”.

The result of ocean extraction and extinction is not only evidenced by the abundance of collected dead animals, but also in their own habitats: “In his childhood memories, everything stays the same, but as a grown man, he returned after many years only to find the same reef of his childhood stripped bare and barren, haunted and deserted like a graveyard”. Opposed to ocean imaginaries and the natural history museum, the environmental world has not been stilled or eternalised. The eternal presence of specimens in the natural history museum is traded with the present and future absence of these specimens in their natural habitats; life is traded for death for the sake of knowability, scientific research, visibility, aesthetics and monetary gain. The narrator finishes his narrative with one final memory: “He remembers now the ferry crossing, sitting on deck in the wind and sun, and looking out across the bay. ‘Blowers’ they were called, white fountains of water shooting across the calm waters of the bay, a regular occurrence that no one paid much attention to. Only now he realizes, that this must have been whales, spouting as they came up for air”.

By interlacing the voice-over of the ocean and the creatures that live and make the ocean with both childhood and collective memories of some of the specimens, *Depot* counters the way in which voice-over is usually employed in wildlife documentaries. Wildlife documentaries, like natural history museums, aim to make animals transparent and knowable through mediated technologies. As such, their voice-overs are often characterised by anthropomorphically projected psychology onto animals (McMahon 7). This is reversed in *Depot*, as the taxonomical drive of the natural history museum is undercut by the voice-over. The voice-over distorts by withholding information about animals onscreen, he does not describe the images or explain them, subverting the informative and educational framing of conventional wildlife film. Due to the juxtaposition of the voice-over and visuals, *Depot* asks the viewer to imagine the animals projected on screen beyond their eternal captivity in the natural history museum and wildlife documentary tropes.

Through memory, all times—past, present, future—co-exist, which therefore forms a layer of temporality that is heterogeneous and a crucial aspect of understanding *Depot* as a new clock. This experience of non-linear time is emphasized through the juxtaposition of the narrator’s vivid memories with the images of the dead animals in the natural history museum context. The monologue goes against the desire to collect them (as physical objects nor for scientific information). The combination of stilling and the voice-over thus create what philosopher Gilles Deleuze terms ‘time-images’ in *Depot*. Instead of being subordinate to movement, the film installation shows a direct image of time which opens up the past as in motion (169). A key factor of the time-image is the dissolution of chronology and the separation between past, present and future, opening up time, which means that “there is no present which is not haunted by a past and future” (Deleuze 38). Memory plays a key role in the time-image, as perception is related to memory instead of action in this type of cinema. Importantly, the time-image in *Depot* as transgressive time tenses invites explorations of colonial history not as closed off but as part of the colonial present, vital to conceptualising extinction temporalities.

The time-image makes tangible that perception is continually invaded by memory, which produces a nonlinear temporality, defining duration not as succession but coexistence. Linearity of time and knowledge of the ocean as capitalist and imperialist endeavour is scrutinised by the voice-over, as it presents marine animals as part of human histories before/aside from their Enlightenment scientific discovery and use. Memories explore and rework the past, which offers a productive way of visualising and experiencing nonhuman extinction through non-linearity, as urged by Bastian and Jørgenson. These memories are an exploration of relational worlds with aquatic animals, impossible to rewind, but to be reworked to think and act differently in the present and future. This includes the acknowledgement of histories and ongoing practices of imperialism and extractivism as part of scientific narratives that continue to shape human-animal lifeworlds and the necessity to rework these relations through inseparable social and environmental justice.

Haunting the Archive and Decolonising Linear Time

After the memory about 'blowers' (whales), there follows a break, followed by a different type of space and audio track: large skeletons accompanied by wind instruments playing music that resembles whale song. This second part opens with a close-up of a hook holding something grey, then cuts to another hook holding part of a skeleton and another one, and to a piece of wire holding up part of a skeleton. In this part, the camera cuts to parts of skeletons and jaws of bigger—unidentified—marine animals. Although the framing and lighting of the animals is similar to the first part—mostly in close-up obscuring a totalising view of them—the camera movement is different, as is the editing. The cuts are faster than in the first part and for most of this part, the camera seems handheld and slowly tracks from left to right, up and down skeletons.

As in the first part of *Depot*, there is a dynamism between stillness and movement in time. Stillness is observed as the objects are skeletons, yet movement is formally suggested through the audio track and camera movements. The camera frames the bones from low angles and often up close, due to which it becomes hard for the viewer to discern where one skeleton begins or ends. Due to the way in which these skeletons are displayed next to each other and without fleshy substance, these shots, even when focusing on one skeleton, show multiple skeletons at once, making their boundaries illegible for the viewer. Even more so, as some of the skeletons are incomplete or consist of one or a few bones. Next to this, the camera is gently and slowly swaying, suggesting firstly, that the camera haunts while moving ghostlike; and secondly, that it is swimming among the skeletons, giving the most lifeless creatures of the film a form of agency beyond the scientific and visible world.

I argue that this haunting is double: it is a formal haunting of cinema that makes inanimate images come alive in film projection, and it is the haunting of all the dead animals that make up the natural history marine collection. These hauntings reinforce each other: through the film installation, these animals are given new life

outside of the depot, but are also testimonies to the mass killings that have led to their death, species endangerment and extinction. Haunting is both an aspect of photography and of cinema, as the photograph as index haunts the blurred boundary between life and death through its embalming qualities that I mentioned above. The image with an index is haunted by its object, put into real connection with it as it is assurance of existence (Doane 94), as well as by its aspiration to presence. As characteristic of cinema, being able to show a past as present duration, the threshold between the spaces of life and death becomes uncertain, blurring the boundaries of the rational and supernatural, of the animate and inanimate (Mulvey 37).

Material traces of the past create the immaterial presence of the dead that haunt memory in cinema. In *Depot* the specimens are forced into this position: they have been indexed by taxonomy and preservation and are now double indexes through the installation. They have been forced into visibility through death, with the aim to understand and preserve knowledge of biological life through their death. Mulvey discusses, similar to Doane, that ruins, like photographs, form an imprint left by original objects, bringing with it the possibility of the return of the repressed and presence of the dead (106). The haunting quality of bringing to life a past moment or person as characteristic of cinema, made phantoms popular subjects in early cinema, arguably repeated and reflected throughout *Depot*. These animals' bodies and histories recede into the past and form traces of a world marked by their absence due to ecological destruction and extinction, bearing witness to the reality of their once presence. As such, *Depot* intermingles the past and present, preserving the dead as reanimated stillness and as ghosts. The scientific specimens become haunters, disassembling our order of the natural world and primacy of rational/scientific that guards the border of death/object.

In *Depot*, the specimens are not reflecting but making a world beyond taxonomy as part of colonial/scientific epistemologies. The aquatic animals are able to draw together worlds that have been desynchronised and detemporalised from each other through their mass killings, extraction and objectification. I therefore argue that heterogeneous temporalities have a decolonising potential of experience and thought offered by artworks such as *Depot*. As media and political theorist Ariella Aisha Azoulay argues, colonisation does not only consist of land, but also of time. What she terms 'imperial temporality' is an ideology that values preservation of the past and linear progress (75). Imperial institutions such as museums and collections are material evidence of past and ongoing colonialism and the destruction of shared worlds that make museum objects out of artefacts, animals and humans (and their remains).

Azoulay's concept of the 'shutter' is useful in this respect, as it illuminates the way in which the camera operates to (re)produce imperial temporality, as well as visual and physical extraction. The shutter points towards the extractive nature, regardless of context, of both museums and archives, as well as the camera itself (2). The development of the camera coincided with the rise of nationalism and imperialism and was employed to make imperial world destruction visible and

acceptable, and legitimised the world's reconstruction on imperial terms (7). Although Azoulay exclusively theorizes the concept in the context of human lives and cultures, *Depot* demonstrates that this concept could and should be extended into the realm of animal extinction, encompassing both human and non-human destruction and reconstruction.

My analysis of *Depot* demonstrates that the shutter as concept is also useful in dialogue with the natural history museum, to better understand its negotiation of imperial source material and medium. Azoulay states that the camera enabled the "violence of forcing everything to be shown and exhibited to the gaze" (5), which includes the practice and purpose of natural history. The imperial regime of exhibition and enforced visibility of animals as ahistorical objects themselves but testimonies of progressive human knowledge, carries on till this day. As *Depot* suggests, this also leads to the destruction and extinction of animals and reduces them to memories. In the case of aquatic animals in natural history or zoological museums, the question of 'unlearning imperialism', as *Depot* puts forward, then might consist of reinventing them not as detached objects whose representation becomes epistemologically authoritative through assumed objectivity, but through temporality that divides the shutter imposed on them.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Tan uses film to criticise the violence of killing and embalming aquatic animals both on the level of the image and natural history museum object. However, there is a limit to this: these animals are dead and were most probably killed for scientific or display purposes; hence Tan's use of stillness and movement lays bare the tension of these aquatic animals' temporalities in terms of extinction. There is an openness of time, to a degree: the film presents no strict chronology of time, neither is the museum object (as photograph or image) locked into one mode of time. Instead, in *Depot* all three time tenses of past, present and future co-exist, creating heterogeneous extinction temporalities through both image and audio that rework harmful ocean imaginaries. Through Tan's use of the medium, the video's pensive and time-images conceptually reflect the tension of the ethics involved in animal specimen display and its history, reimagining and proposing a future in which the past is rediscovered and explored. In examining extinction temporalities, this means a consistent focus on its entanglement with histories and ongoing practices of imperialism and extractivism. The reworking of the past is directed at the future, which is all the more urgent as there is a finiteness to the photographic image, as there is to mass extinction. The singular and generational deaths cannot be reversed except through memory. Explorations of the past and future in the present through artworks such as *Depot* might lead to different ideas about non-human extinction and the place of personal human histories and the roles of colonialism and capitalism.

Next to this, I have demonstrated that it is vital to garner alternative ways that acknowledge the importance of animal lives that does not rely on their visibility and knowability which ultimately leads to further exploitation and killing (Ratté, Yaeger), but recognizes that invisibility can also mean anti-colonial resistance to the imperial gaze that craves transparency for dominance through imperial tools such as the camera and museum display. I believe *Depot* demonstrates an alternative way of visualizing marine animals that experiments with the invisibility or lack of visibility—through partial framing of animals, through partial lighting and therefore obscurity, by not giving orderly overview shots of depots and the animals arranged together in one shot—and therefore shows an alternative way to imagine human-animal relations needed in the natural history museum and beyond. This is necessary not only to reshape conceptual human-animal hierarchies away from an imperial, dominant gaze, but also crucial as a strategy to include invisible extinction and prevent further developments of the blue frontier.

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