

The Metamorphoses and Metaphors of Water

Laura Castro

To the theme of metamorphosis, which was inscribed in the project of this book, I have added that of metaphor. What is materially transformed is also transformed symbolically; what acquires new forms also acquires new meanings. To this initial remark I add another: I shall, for the most part, refrain from referring to artists' names, titles of works, and places, as well as from providing detailed contextual descriptions and complete historical accounts already addressed in specialized literature. Finally, I should note that I revisited a text written in 2007 and published in 2009 on the subject of water and art. These decisions shaped this collage-like text and my participation in a project difficult to define due to the blind dialogues that organize it.

Uses of Water I: Matter and Technique

The first encounter between water and art is of a workshop-based nature: water is one of the materials, an active agent in various technical processes known across different cultures through the millennial circulation of people and customs, materials and ways of making. Water, whether ocean or river, is also a vehicle of transport and influence; it is both a traded material and the medium through which that exchange takes place.

Art operates within the native environment of materials and requires knowledge of their properties: lightness, density, weight, texture, weave, volume, rigidity, flexibility, opacity, transparency, colour, solubility, and compatibility.

Among the technical processes in which water is fundamental are watercolour painting, printmaking, ink washes, and fresco painting. Watercolour employs water as the solvent for a mixture of ground pigments and other substances whose origins have varied over time, although the essential technique has remained unchanged. Parallel to this technique is the ink wash, traditionally obtained by mixing distilled or boiled water with India ink. Several printmaking techniques involve water, such as etching, in which the process is carried out through the corrosive action of an acid diluted in water. The term originally referred to the metal plate on which the artist drew, the acidic solution into which the plate was immersed, and eventually the artwork resulting from the process itself. Aquatint, similarly, designated another type of intaglio printmaking based on a different chemical solution. In fresco painting, water is likewise a primary material. Frescoes require a perfect combination of three ingredients: lime, sand, and water. In appropriate proportions and with the full integration of these materials, the wall is formed layer by layer, with varying thicknesses, until the final layer is ready to receive

drawing and paint applied to its still-moist surface. Water also participates in the technical processes of sculpture. It forms part of plaster mixtures used during the preparatory stages of works ultimately executed in stone or cast in metal. Clay comes from places associated with water, such as clay pits and riverbeds, and artists knew how to remove excess water. In sculptors' workshops, water was used to moisten clay models at the end of each working day.

Beyond being a vital technical component of art, water may simply be a necessary condition for artistic existence. In exhibition contexts, many contemporary art installations incorporating living plants require irrigation in order to survive. Some artists have included trees in their projects and transplanted them into landscaped environments, something made possible only through sustained watering that enabled the continuation of their life cycles.

Rather than being controlled by artists, the alliance of water and art may also occur unexpectedly. Watercourses that covered engraved rocks for centuries contributed to their preservation. In this sense, water itself may be regarded as responsible for a cultural and artistic legacy. Conversely, the absence of water, resulting from changes in river flow, can pose a significant threat to conservation. The rock engravings of the Côa Valley in northeastern Portugal exemplify this unstable condition, having lost their submerged state and become fully visible during the construction works of a dam. Water lies at the centre of this process of patrimonialization, conservation, and deterioration.

In other cases, the role played by water in nature has been imitated for artistic purposes. This occurred in long-term geological phenomena in which water shaped rock formations, producing forms of sculptural value, or at least forms perceived as such. Technological progress later harnessed this transformative capacity through controlled water jets for cutting stone.

Yet water may also oppose the interests of art and its institutions. Humidity, that is, water present in the air, together with condensation processes and the growth of fungi and bacteria, contributes to the deterioration, corrosion, and structural alteration of many works of art. Artists' studios, museum galleries, cultural centres, and private art collections may all offer environmental conditions detrimental to conservation. Water does not cooperate with the objectives of art collecting aiming at permanence, as political act of showing power, and as a sign of wealth. On the contrary, it operates as a force of destruction and disintegration against such forms of power.

Many artists, however, appropriate these very processes of deterioration and embrace ageing, fading, and even the disappearance of their works, assigning conceptual value to the role of water and accepting the metamorphosis it entails. Accepting change and decay,

artists challenge the activity of conservator-restorers and the obsessions of collectors. Water becomes an instrument of counterpower and critical questioning of the perpetuation of the author's name through the artwork.

This final use of water differs considerably from those identified at the beginning of the text. From the technical and material uses of water to its aesthetic uses, another path opens up. It is a two-way path, because the technical premise participates in an aesthetic dimension, while the aesthetic dimension explores matter and inhabits a specific technical proposition.

Uses of Water II: Representation and Information

Do you know what Mexicans say about the Pacific? That it has no memory.

From the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, directed by Frank Darabont, 1994.

The second encounter between water and art is aesthetic in nature and concerns a representational condition. The artificial and technical simulation of natural elements has long constituted a challenge for artists committed to conveying a faithful vision of the world. Technical virtuosity fostered recognition of natural elements and persuaded viewers of the truthfulness of representation. Representational art rests upon the order of the visible.

As part of an aesthetic paradigm with profound implications for artistic practice, representations of watery places are also sources of information that viewers receive with curiosity. Images of places associated with water may signal communal life, established customs, and ways of living, thereby conveying anthropological information. Many scenes from painting and photography bear witness to the communal use of an essential resource: peasants crossing streams where cattle drink; farmers and their animals returning to quench their thirst at the village square fountain; fish unloaded on the beaches of fishing communities while local inhabitants help drag boats ashore; seaside leisure and its social practices; gatherings around fountains from which populations draw water; washerwomen working along streams or at public washing places. These scenes, captured through the artists' picturesque sensibility and offered for collective observation, reveal the establishment of forms of sociability structured around water. At the same time, they evoke a society ordered by economic means, in which those who look and those who are seen project their social expectations.

Places of water also provide historical information. Naval battles, great maritime voyages, and shipwrecks are common themes in historical painting, serving as records of victories or disasters for posterity. Such places were also depicted through representations of waterways and oceanic coastlines in a form of cartographic painting that mapped the conquest of territory from the sea or the occupation of lands taken from their native inhabitants. Water accompanies the metamorphoses of history and politics.

When history is shaped by biographies, individual accounts are woven into the collective narratives. The character's speech, quoted in the epigraph, reveals a connection to the ocean in a seaside setting where one can live without a past. The poetic form of this sentimental geography does not erase the physical space and the anthropological place.

Uses of Water III: Symbolism and the Inner World

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*What music would you be
if you were not water?*

Eugénio de Andrade (1974). *Escrita da Terra*.¹

When the representation of water becomes intertwined with other motivations, another encounter emerges. The order of the visible gives way to the order of the symbolic, the utterable and the unutterable. Intellectually coded narratives differ profoundly from descriptions of observable reality above mentioned.

In religious scenes, conceived and organized according to iconographic conventions, water is associated with birth and rebirth, sacred bathing and baptism; it signifies purification and the spiritual rediscovery of nature and the world.

In mythological scenes, mythical beings emerge from the waves, and aquatic creatures populate large scenographic sculptural compositions. Dolphins and mermaids pour forth water or allow themselves to be bathed by it; nymphs, tritons, and allegories of rivers appear in urban fountains in private and public parks. They tell erudite narratives.

In secular scenes, still and unsettling waters evoke death or sleep. They are a source of ghosts and gentle apparitions, evoking tears and melancholy.

As part of the magnificence of nature and of grandiose compositions, water contributed to the emergence of new aesthetic categories, such as the sublime. Torrential rains and storms, dense fogs, monumental glaciers, wild waterfalls, seas of clouds, and the vastness of nocturnal oceans may inspire admiration and ecstasy on the one hand, and submission and terror on the other. Water becomes the protagonist of a prodigious and inaccessible nature inhabited by forces, energy, and spirit.

¹ Original version: *VENEZA / Que música serias / se não fosses água?* In Eugénio de Andrade [1974] (2005). *Poesia*. 2nd edition, p. 211. Porto: Fundação Eugénio de Andrade.

The physical properties of water evoke its freshness, the springtime of all births, its maternal nature, and its role as the universal, primordial water. They also evoke depth and the existence of fantastical worlds beneath the calm appearance of the surface. Waters may be heavy and subterranean, traversing mysterious realms, serving as the setting for funerary ceremonies, seas of darkness and terrifying experiences.

Although artists may produce verisimilitude, symbolic and allegorical uses of water in art can disrupt such readings. They draw upon identified, idealized, or invented places belonging to physical geography, the geography of thought, and spiritual geography. Rather than recognition, they privilege contemplation; rather than observation, meditation; rather than the visible, the invisible. Water insinuates itself into other processes of power and knowledge.

One of the most significant dimensions is the symbolism of water as a mirror, as a surface that returns to us a dematerialised image, a reflection, an illusion. Water as desire.

Another symbolic image is flowing water as an image of temporal flux, the transience of life, and the ephemerality of existence. In literature and the visual arts, one can think as a river thinks and embody a place of water. Eugénio de Andrade shows how in his very brief poem – the epitome of a city of water that sounds like music.

Uses of Water IV: Critique and the Future

[...] the Vassivière site takes shape and is understood through its hydrological system: springs, rivers, peat bogs and lakes. Biological diversity, along with the diversity of landscapes and land uses, is directly linked to this system. For this reason, and because the landscape's harmonious character depends on water – both in its form and in its capacity to sustain life – we have titled the study for the Vassivière Landscape Charter: 'Drinking the Water from the Lake'.

Gilles Clément (2002). *Boire l'Eau du Lac. Charte Paysagère du Pays de Vassivière*.²

When questions of visual representation are replaced by the direct use of water, a new aesthetic paradigm emerges, one that leads to non-representation, anti-representation, and presence. In art, water exceeds its material and technical dimensions, returns to its

² Original version: [...] le site de Vassivière se dessine et se lit à partir du système hydrologique : sources, rivières, tourbières, lacs. La diversité biologique, des paysages et des usages se trouve directement liée à ce système. Pour cette raison, et parce que la résolution heureuse du paysage dépend de l'eau dans sa forme et dans son aptitude à dispenser la vie, nous intitulons l'étude pour la charte paysagère de Vassivière : "Boire l'eau du lac". In Gilles Clément. (2002) *Boire l'Eau du Lac. Charte Paysagère du Pays de Vassivière*. Étude opérationnelle paysage et environnement pour le Lac de Vassivière.

primary state, and offers itself in its natural condition. Artists retrace the paths of water. Rather than observing it from a distance or simulating it through pigments, alabaster, or marble, they engage directly with the places in which it exists. Water is no longer an illusion crafted from artistic materials. It becomes natural matter, ephemeral process, and site-specific installation. It becomes central in practices that emphasize the its relationship with societies.

Some approaches are poetic and meditative: ice or snow sculptures that vanish in the first hours of the morning; records of the circles created by a stone thrown into water; vegetal elements carried away by water. Others are critical and confrontational: the miniaturization and containment of bodies of water within galleries; the creation of purification systems for polluted rivers; extreme performative experiments in which the body is subjected to torrents of water; performances in which water's purifying capacity evokes memories of war; installations on the water cycles of contamination and death in the systems that sustain hydroelectric and nuclear power plants.

Artists become ethnographers, activists, and researchers. They follow technical and scientific processes, study abundance and scarcity, immerse themselves in rivers, frequent their banks, observe life within these environments, reflect and imagine its future. They adopt a critical stance, incorporating marginal voices from urban spaces that remain excluded from circuits of power, in pursuit of social justice.

Many projects function as metaphors for the present, interrogating politics, economics, society, and the environment. Themes such as water and biodiversity, the impact of the Anthropocene, and ecological reconfiguration establish an eco-politics of water. The aforementioned document by Gilles Clément on the uses of water strikes a balance between technical and scientific, aesthetic and pragmatic, contemplative and political perspectives. His perspective shifts from visibility to sensoriality, from the visible to the primal act of drinking and the sense of taste. This shift reflects a critical and forward-looking stance.

Water Imagination

[...] direct images of matter. Sight gives them names, but the hand knows them. A dynamic joy manipulates them, moulds them, lightens them. These images of matter are dreamt of in a substantial and intimate way, setting aside forms, perishable forms, vain images, the ceaseless becoming of surfaces. They have weight; they have a heart.

I cannot sit beside a stream without falling into a deep reverie, without reliving my happiness... It is not necessary for it to be the stream of our home, the water of our home. Anonymous water knows all my secrets. The same memory rises from every fountain.

Gaston Bachelard (1942). *L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*.³

Bachelard wrote about formal imagination and material imagination as creative and inspirational forces. He explored these forces in myths, literature, art, alchemy, spoken language, beliefs, rituals, cultural and artistic conventions, and addressed the ways in which they travel across different periods and cultures. He examined their psychological, psychoanalytic, moral, and aesthetic implications. His work is foundational to thinking about water and its many manifestations, arguing in favour of creative imagination over reproductive imagination.

Throughout his book on the material imagination of water, he establishes a catalogue of categories of liquid-based imagination: verbal, visual, discursive, poetic, de-objectifying, dynamic, open, impulsive, sentimental, melancholic, powerful, unconscious, organic, and ever-becoming...

The imagination of water is endless, and the creation of watery worlds belongs to creators, artists, and philosophers.

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³ Original version: [...] *des images de la matière, des images directes de la matière. La vue les nomme, mais la main les connaît. Une joie dynamique les manie, les pétrit, les allège. Ces images de la matière, on les rêve substantiellement, intimement, en écartant les formes, les formes périssables, les vaines images, le devenir des surfaces. Elles ont un poids, elles sont un cœur. [...] Je ne puis m'asseoir près d'un ruisseau sans tomber dans une rêverie profonde, sans revoir mon bonheur... Il n'est pas nécessaire que ce soit le ruisseau de chez nous, l'eau de chez nous. L'eau anonyme sait tous mes secrets. Le même souvenir sort de toutes les fontaines.* In Gaston Bachelard. [1942] (2016). *L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, pp. 12, 19. Édition numérique réalisée le 10 juillet 2016 à Chicoutimi, Ville de Saguenay, Québec.

https://classiques.uqam.ca/classiques/bachelard_gaston/eau_et_les_reves/eau_et_les_reves.pdf