Sea Life, Naked Life, Spectacular Life - drifting in times of global circulation

If there is no […] movement that can annul the
decrees of destiny and prevent the existence of
an endless chain of causation, what is the source
of this free will possessed by living creatures all
over the earth?
Lucretius

Sea: Smooth Space - Striated Space

A triptych of screens. Water. Water. Water. Moving, shifting, folding, floating - always in motion.
A steady noise.
White noise.
It might be oceanic noise but then there is something underneath it.
Something that blends in. Nearly unnoticeable but still present.
Despite its grey colour, the sea is calm.

The sea is a peculiar space. It is a smooth space par excellence and at the same time highly striated. Its liquid surface does not allow land creatures to inhabit it. This surface - just as the desert, the air, the space - is unsuitable for cultivating it, for clearly determining its boundaries, for dominating it through architectural markers, it is unsuitable for storage, unsuitable for land-creature living.

Its inhabitability, however, makes it prone for a different use: Very early, the seemingly empty space of the sea induced fantasies of traveling. Today, it seems the sea has become a space made for seamless transactions complementing digital space in its ability to integrate a multitude of sites into the global circulation spun by capitalist economies. No moving big amounts of land masses, piercing mountains, bulldozing woods, uprooting communities necessary to create an infrastructure that allow fast speed transport. But how to find one's way within a smooth space - a space that is constantly moving? A space that does not provide points of orientation once the shore has gone out of sight? A space that is occupied by intensities, wind, noise? Fantasies of traveling always came with attempts to navigate the sea, to appropriate the smooth space for maritime transport.

A way of appropriating is striating a space into a grid. To measure means control; being in control by making everything subject to the same rule. Early techniques of striation included crude maps marking distances between ports, they included looking up for points of orientation - instead of searching the surface of the sea - to pursue calculations based on observations of stars and the sun. But it was not before an increasingly sophisticated system of latitudinal lines - running from the special conditions of the latitudes of the Indian Ocean to the elliptical circuits of the Atlantic - were combined with a system of plotting longitude lines that the degree of striation had reached a point where the smooth space could be considered to be tamed for maritime transport, connecting the urban hubs of an international world economy. It is the effectiveness of striating - of homogenizing, of controlling - that makes moving 90% of the world trade in value by sea efficient.

But then the sea is also this other space. The sea is smooth, liquid. It is constantly moving. In its rolling and twisting and arching character it is a smooth space that eludes attempts of

homogenizing and subsuming it under a dominating principle. Despite the effective techniques of striating the sea, in its materiality it is a space that is bodily experienced rather than grasped by optical perception; whose smooth materials are witnesses of forces, symptoms of ever-becoming vortexes. The smooth space is constructed by local operations involving changes in direction - as, for instance induced by changes of wind or streams. It is a space of becoming, that is unpredictable. There is always something that eludes attempts of control.

Maritime Life - Naked Life

With the image of this triptych of liquid materiality fading, the right screen shows a view onto a wet wooden square, surrounded by metal walls, no sight of the sea, only the grey sky. A crane. It is the command bridge in the background that tells me that I see the deck of a containership.
The noise becomes the humming noise of machines.
A figure walks towards the camera, walks across the square and out of sight.
 He wears a helmet.

Life at sea has never been without rules, it has always been a life with customs, traditions and protocols practiced on open sea, where maritime law did not count. Such practices served to survive in times when survival seemed to be least probable. On the one hand, they consisted of behavioural rules that organised the social body of the crew, maintaining a level of order, of humanity, of civilisation even in extreme situations. They determined who would be the last person off a sinking ship, they determined who would be killed and eaten first if it serves the crew to survive shipwrecking. On the other hand, such traditions included the ability to read the sea, read the forms of the waves, the colours of the sky, the clouds, listen to the wind and sense it on one's body. Seamen developed a wisdom of navigating that was as versatile as the sea. It was a complex and empirical system of navigation based on wind and noise, colours and pressures but without the ability to take one's bearings.

Yet with technologies of position finding and sea magnetic survey in place these rules located in the wisdom of life in the open seem to have changed in character. They have been replaced by positions, functions and procedures that are part of a managerial grid organizing the open space of the sea into a hyper-efficient space of transaction. Sea life means becoming part of the infrastructure of a world economy that organizes life according to one governing principle. Sea life means moving within the well-defined channels that ensure efficient, productive operations; being part of a highly automated system. Such seamless moving, however, presumes standardisation, 'normal operations'. There must be no exceptions.

Both, cities and states pursue striating the sea for organising purposes. However, for different reasons. Whilst cities pursue commercial, states further political interests. Whilst the latter are striating the sea into a coordinate system to mark boundaries and control state territories, the first one use it to establish fast and efficient channels of transgressing boundaries and to connect various commercial hubs into a global network.
And then there are moments, where the two intersect. These are moments when state law over-codes the rules of international maritime transport, leading to firmly regulated channels of exchange on the one and strange voids on the other - as if attempts of passage that lie outside these highly controlled points of contact always lead to nowhere.

Organizing the sea, states and cities operate on different, yet intertwining levels - one is sealing off, whilst the other is opening up to the world; local, global; territory, network. It is

their intersection that allow dreams about the possibility of a different life - dreams that were born in the moment when your eyes run over the line of the horizon. Dreams that were created when your soul was already somewhere else, whilst your body remained on the shore. Those dreams that you bring back with your mind reaching out to the horizon; those dreams that travel across the open space of the ocean to create the desire of leaving.

And then there is this vessel and its ability of transgressing the boundaries set and controlled by states. A vessel with its capacity of afloat in-betweenness that makes using the channels established by the commercial system so attractive for humans willing to leave the territory of one state to seep into another. It stirs phantasies of invisibly transgressing boundaries to reach another place, another life.

A lot travels with those vessels - animals, plants, viruses. They travel accidentally, following their own rhythms that make them imperceptible. Traveling with those vessels, whilst not being part of the world economy's infrastructure implies becoming imperceptible - intentionally. But how does one become imperceptible? Some believe in amulets that provide their wearer with magical powers. Others know that one can easily lose oneself in masses of people, becoming part of a body and consciousness that transgresses what one would usually consider the boundary of one's self. Yet, the solitary journey on a vessel does not leave any space for magic, nor does it provide crowds in which one could lose oneself. Becoming imperceptible to secretly travel implies withdrawing from the bureaucratic infrastructures that turn humans into citizens of a particular country. It means leaving the protective shell of a state-bound identity. It means ceasing to be a person. It means becoming a present absence instead. An absence that the mariners are aware of, because they know that ships carry all sorts of invited and uninvited load. This kind of becoming imperceptible implies giving up one's citizen rights - also the rights for action - and abandon oneself to a situation. Only to react to it - whatever it will be.

To travel secretly on a vessel you have to become a stowaway. Becoming a stowaway implies peeling off the layers of citizenship to become a present absence. Being a stowaway implies remaining undetected. Whilst the first hurts, the second is much more difficult. Remaining imperceptible is a question of moving - moving just when the crew's attention runs from one focus to the other, from one task to the other. Being imperceptible on a vessel implies knowing workflows to move just slightly out of tune: out of order, out of sight. It implies a different rhythm.

Yet, there are so many critical moments when the secret paths of a stowaway cross the procedural paths of maritime life. There are so many moments of exhaustion when sleep overwhelms the body and forces it to rest. So many instances when a stowaway can be spotted. Being detected, a stowaway turns from an imperceptible body to naked life. "There are no rules for stowaways." Naked life is all that remains.

Crossing Paths

The two remaining screens replace the view of the deck with a liquid diptych of the sea again. But now the camera is moving. Up and down. Showing two images of the see moving against each other. Up and down, down and up. At the seam between those moving images something comes half into view, moves out of view, just to come back in again. A raft? It is far away.

A voice cuts through the white noise of sea and containership sounds. A stewart on the command bridge with the view on the openness of the sea recounts the moment, when he and his crew spotted the "Raft Man" whose raft still moves in and out of sight on the middle screen. A second man on the right screen sits in an armchair - the captain who seems to be at home, complementing the memories of the first.

At the intersection between the commercial and political organisation of the sea, the cruel regulations of the state apparatus that over-code the moments of passage from international to territorial waters, state that washed-up stowaways will not be allowed to go ashore.
A stowaway would remain in the custody of the crew, his life would be limited to the territory of the vessel. Imagined life became a life at sea.
"In the old days, on Norwegian ships a stowaway might remain on board for 10, 20 or 30 years. In the end they were usually granted Norwegian citizenship" - one had to be persistent but might have had success at some point - at a point when one has nearly forgotten about life at land.

Today, sea life is not only determined by state-law, it is also formed by its commercial organizations. Sea life means moving within well-defined channels that ensure efficient, productive operations; it means being part of a highly automated system. Such seamless moving, however, presumes standardization, 'normal operations'. Detecting a stowaway immediately changes ordinary into exceptional circumstances. It is one of these grains that makes the machine stutter.
The cruel rule of the state still says that there is no chance of putting a washed-up stowaway ashore. Hence, detecting a stowaway implies plunging into the void, it implies having to deal with a problem.
The cruel rule of efficiency, instead, demands business as usual - no voids, no exceptions. Life at sea has always been cruel. It had to be cruel for the very fact that it is a milieu that is hostile to land creatures. And sometimes the openness of the space invited sadistic behaviour.
But the rule of efficiency that characterises maritime transport today, seems to systematically preclude empathy, humaneness, generosity. It demands discarding everything that disturbs the work flow. So when sea life and naked life meet, naked life is turned into raw material to be processed in the production of goods - or waste.

"So take a Russian or an Indian ship: to avoid such problems they just throw them overboard … I have sailed with lots of Russians in my crew. One of them told me he'd been the freezer operator on an industrial trawler in the South Atlantic. They always unloaded their fish in Morocco. Then they would head off to the Canary Isles to take on new provisions - before heading back to the South Atlantic to fish again. Almost every time they found stowaways on board. If they found one, two or three stowaways on board, they pop them into the deep freeze and freeze them alive. When they reached the fishing grounds they threw them overboard." Throwing life overboard has developed into normal practice.

Being Humane in Inhuman Times
The ocean surf blends in with the gurgling sound of water floating around the raft. I am close, so close to the water that I can sense its liquid materiality that enfolds everything incapable of floating; that sinks and asphyxiate human bodies that venture in it without flotation devices. And I can see the floating device that is only just floating. This device that marks the threshold between swimming and sinking.
The horizon moves menacingly, the sea's smooth space is working on me - I am lost, stressed, out of control. Drifting.

Being shipwrecked on such a tiny floating device is not only dangerous because the probability of sinking is so high. The sea's eternal motion makes a small physical mass like a human body imperceptible.

Whilst being imperceptible is so crucial for safeguarding a stowaway's life, imperceptibility is close to a death sentence when being in open water, waiting for someone to spot and rescue you. "His chance of survival was pretty small. Setting him adrift like this was attempted murder.
" And yet, setting him adrift instead of throwing him overboard there was a chance of survival. For stowaways when being detected, naked life is all that remains. The rule of efficiency operating on these vessels suggests discarding these problematic bodies, throwing them overboard.
Taking the time to construct a floating device, setting him adrift instead of letting his body plunge into the vortex of the sea's liquidity deviates from this rule of efficiency. Deviating from the rule of discarding and instead setting him adrift entails a moment of humaneness - this tiny moment of humaneness that acknowledges the other as someone, not as mere bio-chemical material that at best can be used as a bait to attract fish. It opens up a small chance of survival. A chance that is small in this vast space, a chance that gets even more reduced by the moving masses of liquid materiality that make everything that floats just above sea level difficult to detect. But still a chance.
Stow-away, throw-away, drift-away.

In German there is a word for someone being set adrift - "aus-gesetzt sein" - literally meaning 'set outside-the-law'. Setting him adrift carries the chance of re-introducing him into the system of state law - of (re-)including the excluded. "A shipwrecked castaway can be dropped off in any country you like."
Shipwrecking him, despite taking into account his death, entails the chance of closing that crack in state law, this void that opens up for sea men when detecting a human being secretly traveling off-grid. It bears the chance of restoring citizenship.

Likewise, detecting such life set adrift, rescuing, caring, restoring what is left of it follows paths that run parallel to the procedures and technologies that the commercial and political organisation of the sea offer. A shipwrecked life will not be detected by the screens organising the movements of the container's journey. But men of sea know that there is more than such technical operations can process. They know that this liquid, this eternally moving space can only be known trough one's own senses: the wind, the colours of the sky, the currents. It is this different kind of perceiving the sea, this bodily presence at sea - often rejected as inferior to technology-driven navigation - that allows spotting unusual phenomena. Whilst spotting life adrift entails deviating from the technologies of the commercial complex, rescuing life adrift deviates from the rule of efficiency. "Many ships had sailed past. He said he had waved. Many of them had sailed past closer to him than we did. But you know how it is. There are nations that don't like such things. They don't want the problem because it can easily become one." It entails temporarily shifting the priorities that guide action on the vessel - like building a raft. But then watching over the singularities of a life that are not congealed into a person - the person gone lost in open water - acknowledges life itself.

Gridded Life
The nearly claustrophobic space of a Swedish police station. The dense atmosphere of highly stratified urban space. A space, where the bureaucratic grid used to capture all aspects of life seems to be so tightly knit that it appears to be impossible not to be part of it. A policeman going through files, whilst an individual sits listlessly on the other side of the desk. As if he would not belong to the scene.
On the right screen a fingerprint scanner. Hands in plastic gloves work on other hands, placing them on the scanner. On the left screen I can see water. Water that is close, so close that I can hear its gurgling sound again. Water that flows. The camera is underwater

under the construction of the raft, looking up. The flowing water constantly dissolves the image of the raft's frame. It liquifies this frame. On the middle screen a map appears. The scanning procedure on the right screen is replaced by an image of the lifeless atmosphere of a bureaucracy's corridor.

Re-constructing a person comes with all sorts of procedures. These procedures that do not acknowledge life itself but only acknowledge the grid we call person and its spatial organisation: home - father; command bridge - captain; prison - criminal; Migration Board Application Unit - asylum seeker; unknown unknown - detention centre. There are places, there are duties, there are proceedings.
 Re-constructing a person comes with bureaucracy and its apparatuses of capture: forms, data systems, experts, tests. It comes with filed life.
Those apparatuses aim at pinning down: Identifying, segmenting, distinguishing. Knowing. Proceeding. Those apparatuses work on the unknown, trying to reintroduce it into the grid that marks its area of influence. No smooth but striated space - state territory - on which its subjects circulate on pre-defined paths. Re-constructing a person comes with control.

 Only a person - this registered, socially accepted and bureaucratically controlled entity - has the opportunity of hopping from one passage of cosmopolitan circulation to the next. Re-constructing a person means re-introdcuing an individual into civic life with all its rights and duties. Only a person has the opportunity of using channels to move within, move easily and without fear for her life. Yet being re-introduced into civic life does not necessarily open up the channels that one has wishes for. Obeying the state's desire of control, giving away personal information often opens up channels that immediately send you back to where you came from. Or it opens up channels that only allow moving within a small, very confined radius; channels that offer more dead-ends than high-speed channels of possibility.

Spectacular Life
Darkness. On the middle screen one reads the message that the crew sent to the coast guard. Disappearing back into darkness. Darkness again.
"A few hours later we arrived at Steningssund. There were crowds of people…" On the right screen appears a hand thumbing through a thick file. "…including television news…" On the remaining two screens, the image of someone on a tiny raft in the vast liquid space spins into view. "…and Swedish TV and loads of newspapers." The camera moves as in a helicopter encircling the subject of interest. "It did not even take half an hour from when we found him to when the first plane arrived. Light aircraft that circled above us." Every spin of the camera does not bring the subject of interest closer but further away from view until it nearly disappears in the bright reflection of the sunlight mirrored by the sea. Another turn and the image of the raft disappears in darkness again. Another turn of the page and the image of the hand flicking through the file dissolves.
Darkness.

Mass media surrounds the being on its raft like a pack of hungry wolves, not just curiously but hungry - hungry for a story that captures the attention of the masses. This hunger (re-)constructs a different person - not the filed life of persons that the state apparatuses re-construct in order to be able to control their movements on state territory. Such filed life needs the ordinary.
The ordinariness of biographies. Mass media instead re-constructs a spectacular being that follows its own rules. Mass media is hungry for the exceptional; it blurs the everyday to create an exceptional person –

the Raft Man. They have their own experts, procedures and apparatuses that do not necessarily aim at capturing but speculating about this exceptional being. They initiate a cacophony of possible explanations, of possible possibilities, trying to keep the fire of attention burning as long as they can: just one more headline, just one more article, one more…. With every new headline, with every layer of speculation, however, the picture becomes more blurred than sharp, as those statements compete with the statements of the state authorities about the truth. With every layer it becomes more and more difficult to settle for one explanation. Truth is drifting.

Life: Sovereign Drift

On the left screen a hand leafing through the file. On the right screen a close-up of the man at sea. The middle screen is black. And in the blackness of the gap between the human in the open and the person on file appears an account that he has given about himself. It is when the text moves just too quickly for me to read all of it; when a picture draws my attention, turning away my view from the subtitles; when on the three screens three different scenes evolve, too different to pay attention to them all at once. It is in these moments when I realize that this slipping is equally present as the moments of capture. A dangerous slipperiness in the eyes of systems of control.

His own account about where he comes from is multiple. It does not bring light to but obscures even more the various attempts of 'experts' in the media and different departments of the state authorities to clarify his identity and belonging. It blurs it by adding layer after layer to the narratives spun by the media and by state authorities; yet another layer that does not fit to the ones that are already in circulation; yet another layer that precludes coherence.
I can never actually see this man from the open. The camera is always too close or too far away. Even if the camera manages to keep the right distance he is an absent presence - blurred. Something always slips my attention. I am aware of this slipping and yet unable to catch it. It is as if the man from the open has been infected by the smoothness of the oceanic space that, in permanently moving, recurrently makes itself unreadable.
It seems like the only ones who have been able to see him are the ones who have pulled him out of the water, who have cleaned him and tried to warm him up, who sat down next to him guarding the signs of life that his body still showed. They saw what they needed to see and left the rest to him.
They could also see him because they know the sea, this smooth space. Because they know what is possible beyond the state-controlled territories, because they know life at sea. This life at sea that comes with the sounds and colours and stories and people.

Multiplying the narratives, the speculations, the personas that the authorities and the media try to (re-)construct allows the man from the open to gain back a moment of sovereignty. This small moment of sovereignty - just like the tiny moment of humaneness that lies in constructing a raft for the body to be discarded into the sea. It is this tiny moment of sovereignty that comes with actively blurring the view that others have on him, this tiny moment that allows withdrawing from the mechanisms of capture. It is this moment that reintroduces drifting into the movements imposed on him by state-bound procedures - when the image of the lifeless corridor of the detention centre fades into the image of the raft rolling on the waves of the ocean. It is this moment that makes sure that something always slips. The moment when the smooth space comes over him; when he himself is becoming smooth.

Making sure that something always slips, points to existence beyond the grid that organises life into the life of a person: father, seaman, citizen, consumer, refugee. Making

sure that something always slips points to life outside the apparatuses of capture that surround, that percolate, that organise us.

Only at the end I see the man on the raft moving on his own for the first time - when he lies down on the raft in the open.

A flock of birds migrating to the South.

Addendum

Since I saw Drifting in 2015, I have seen many, many images of people sitting on rafts or little boats in their eyes this desperate hope. These images highly suggest perceiving Birgit Johnsen's and Hanne Nielsen's work through the lens of what the Western world coined the refugee crisis. In fact, the pull of these images is so strong that for me, it was rather difficult not to go down this path. However, giving in, I think, would inevitably have reduced Drifting to a singular narrative blending in with the visuals of refugee fate that flood our everyday life. It would inevitably be perceived as a narrative that would not belong to one's own life - such narratives always belong to someone else. It would inevitably provide this false sense of security that the grid that organizes us as citizens, consumers, tourists from the Western world, is so solid that it is close to impossible to move outside the channels it provides.

Yet, hopping from one passage of cosmopolitan circulation to the next, have you ever lost your wallet? Have you ever been in the situation in which you could not proof that you are the one you claim to be? Have you ever felt this unease when an officer at the border control skeptically looks you in the face and back on you ID card asking you to take off your glasses? It is so easy to wind up somewhere in the interstices between the tendrils of the world economies, between the bureaucratic grids of state territories. The illusion of a seamless passage, of free movement, of traveling in a borderless world comes for the price of being highly controlled by state authorities.

My attempt to engage with Drifting from a spatial perspective, asking how space is organised and what kinds of effects particular spaces have on life, therefore aimed at opening up the images of Drifting for a multitude of positions in and effects of the maelstrom of global flows. This, of course, does not exclude engaging with questions of becoming a refugee but it also opens up the view on how our lives are organized in the age of global circulation induced by world economies and controlled by state bureaucracies. Eventually it poses the question of life beyond the grip of these organizing entities, which is a question equally relevant to us as to those humans who are locked up in the label refugee.