Liquid Conviviality in Chilean Documentary Film

Dynamics of Confluences and Counter/fluences

Berit Callsen

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Abstract

Guided by the concept of liquid conviviality, referring to the conflictual connectivity, interrelation, and interaction between human and nonhuman actors in aquatic ecosystems, this Working Paper focuses on the staging of aquatic, and especially fluvial, agency in three examples of recent Chilean documentary films produced between 2008 and 2021. Building on theoretical insights in the blue humanities and material ecocriticism, it scrutinizes the filmic strategies and procedures that frame water as an active player. Furthermore, within a broader perspective of aquatic agency, we ask to which extent the liquid poetics, aesthetics and materialities in these films perform counternarratives facing neocolonial forms of invasion such as extractivism and devastation of watery ecosystems in Indigenous territories. Here, dynamics of confluences and counter/fluences are revealed by performing acts of dissident power and by focusing peripheral knowledges, as well as strategies of resistance.

Keywords: aquatic agency | counternarratives | blue humanities

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Contents

1. Introduction

This working paper focuses on the staging of aquatic, and especially fluvial, agency in three examples from recent Chilean documentary films produced between 2008 and 2021. Considering filmic codes such as sound, setting and camera, it explores the construction of relations between water and humans as well as about the implications of a visualized narrative capacity and a material quality of water. How do these films create an aquatic agency? How do they model forms of a human-nonhuman conviviality? One hypothesis is that the interrelation between the material, poetical and aesthetical notion of water is crucial in this undertaking.

In the approximation to the films, our reflections are guided by the concept of liquid conviviality. This term describes the conflictual connectivity, interrelation and interaction between human and nonhuman actors in aquatic ecosystems. More specifically, considering discourses from the blue humanities and perspectives from material ecocriticism that will be presented in more detail later, this concept focuses on the agency of watery elements in these encounters and examines their potential to question and subvert underlying asymmetric structures.[1] Furthermore, within the field of literary and cultural studies, the idea of liquid conviviality raises the question of the aesthetic modulations of aquatic elements on the one hand, and their potential to influence this aesthetic, on the other. At this juncture, by engaging with a vital materiality, different media can promote forms of thinking with water (Oppermann 2023) as an epistemological shift, recognizing the subjecthood of watery elements and aquatic environments.

In addition, the concept implies a self-reflexive notion. Fluidity itself then becomes a conceptual force of epistemological dynamisation: by shaping bodies of water as active elements, the films question hegemonic binary perspectives on the animate/inanimate, subject/object and land/water dichotomies, which also subverts the strategies of producing difference and otherness themselves. The "Other" then appears as pivotal figure between the human and the nonhuman articulating (conflictual) dialogues between Western and non-Western discourses on nature and environment as well as on human and nonhuman relationships themselves.

Thus, within a broader perspective of aquatic agency, we ask to what extent the liquid poetics, aesthetics and materialities in these films perform counternarratives facing neocolonial forms of invasion such as extractivism and devastation of watery ecosystems in Indigenous territories. At this juncture, the subjecthood of rivers, in their role of narrators and protagonists, transmits a decolonial gesture since they are no longer considered as resources to be appropriated, explored and sold, but as animate beings.

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1   For theoretical and methodological insights into dimensions of human-nonhuman conviviality-inequality, see also Manzi 2020.

Here, dynamics of confluences and counter/fluences are revealed by performing acts of dissident power and by focusing peripheral knowledges as well as strategies of resistance. Hence, aquatic agencies can be considered in most of these filmic works as articulations of Indigenous epistemologies that stand their ground.

2.   Watery Actors – Liquid Stories: Insights from the Blue Humanities

The blue humanities arose as an interdisciplinary subfield of the environmental humanities in the beginning of 2000.[2] Rooted in literary and culture studies, the blue humanities deal with theoretical concepts from ecocriticism,[3] new materialism and posthumanism and deliver forms of literary and cultural critique that focus on water aiming at a "[…] richer connection between humans and water […]" (Mentz 2023: 24). Consequently, one of the crucial ideas in many blue humanities approaches is the agential power of nonhuman entities; water in all its forms (rain, floods, humidity, rivers, lakes, oceans, ice, snow, fog, glaciers, etc.) is considered as an active player (Mentz 2023: 17).[4] Furthermore, the entanglement between human and nonhuman actors is at the centre of blue humanities perspectives. Some of the most striking concerns that result from these basic thoughts are a revision of the relationship between water and humans as well as of the central position of humankind. Attunement to the senses (above all visual, haptic, and auditory) and reflections on the notions of liquidity and fluidity (both in their metaphoric and material meaning) are further thematic nuclei. Thus, forms of embodied thinking that tend to defy dichotomies of all kinds are at the core of blue humanities approaches.

At present, a certain consolidation in the field can be observed, since various handbooks on blue humanities are being published right now: In his *Introduction to the Blue Humanities*, published recently in 2023, Steve Mentz gives an overview from the beginnings in the new millennium, emerging from Anglophone literary contexts and focusing on Atlantic, Mediterranean and Caribbean sites, to current approaches that widen the perspective including "Indigenous and Pacific ideas" (Mentz 2023: 17). Although these broadened perspectives are gaining in visibility as an object of

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2   From its inception, a plethora of terms and definitions of this interdisciplinary academic field have been circulating. Integrating perspectives from anthropology and history, some of the alternative notions are "blue criticism", "hydro-criticism", "critical ocean studies" or "ocean history" (Mentz 2023: 1).

3   In some approaches, the blue humanities are framed as oppositional perspectives to "[…] the obsessively green visions of ecocriticism" (Mentz 2023: 24) that countervail an ocean's deficit (Dobrin 2021).

4   Mentz states that in the beginning, scholarly perspectives mostly focused on oceans (Mentz 2023: 17). For oceanic perspectives on north-European literature, see Søren Frank and for insights from critical ocean studies that emphasize asymmetrical relations of hydropower and maritime extractivism see Elizabeth DeLoughrey (Frank 2022; DeLoughrey 2023).

scholarship until now there have been only a few academic works concentrating on the Global South. Especially the cultural (water)space of Latin America surprisingly remains a less studied field in Western academic discourses on blue humanities. Within these discourses Lisa Blackmore and Liliana Gómez and Kathrin Sartingen and Stefania Chiarelli have recently published two important studies on liquid ecologies in Latin American and Caribbean art, respectively on representations of water in Portuguese, Brazilian and African literature, film, music, and visual art (Blackmore and Gómez 2020; Sartingen and Chiarelli 2023). Nevertheless, most of the studies on these cultural spaces until now come from Latin American scholarship, strengthening theoretical perspectives from the Global South and drawing special attention to (neo) colonial and extractivist questions concerning bodies of water. To this effect, the dossier *Descolonizar como poética. Aguas libres en la literatura y las artes latinoamericanas recientes* organised by María José Barros and Dámaso Rabanal connects with activist discourses, understanding literary and cultural productions as part of political acts and resisting activities that, moreover, connect with Indigenous epistemologies and ethics (Barros and Rabanal 2023: 2). The dossier *Materia fluvial. Configuraciones estético-políticas de las cuencas de América*, edited by Franca Maccioni and Mónica Bernabé, presents another interesting example of Latin American scholarly perspectives on waterscapes (Bernabé and Maccioni 2022).[5] Until now, the research focus mainly remains on visual art and performance art; surprisingly, film and literature are media that are less studies in this context.[6]

Methodologically, the blue humanities analyse representations of watery sites in different media, such as literature, film, and visual art, but they also draw attention to the materiality of water and on forms of "thinking with water": watery elements then do not appear as mere objects of research, but take on an active role as environments or even as modes of scholarly thinking. This kind of watery presence gains different forms: thus, to Serpil Oppermann in her recently published study *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene*, "thinking with water" means to be attentive for the semantic productions of water: "This new interpretive horizon, which encourages us to be more perceptive of the stories and meanings of fluid matter, transforms our

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5   For a hydro-critical approach to issues related to the colonial period, see also the volume *Hydrocriticism and Colonialism in Latin America* edited by Mabel Moraña (Moraña 2023).

6   The articles "El río como dios de la llanura. Acerca de la poética fluvial en *Historias extraordinarias* de Mariano Llinás", published by Jörg Dünne in 2022, and "'La película fluvial' en Latinoamérica: una mirada comparativa", published by Christian von Tschilschke in 2021, as well as the monograph *Filmästhetik des Fluiden. Strömungen des Erzählens von Vigo bis Tarkowskij, von Huston bis Cameron* (2010) by Franzsiska Heller present examples from Romance Cultural Studies and from Film Studies that recently have offered detailed analysis of the staging of water in film paying attention to the affine correlation of water and the cinematographic medium (Dünne 2022; Tschilschke 2021; Heller 2010).

objectifying attitude to waterscapes and thus generates disanthropocentric modes of thinking" (Oppermann 2023: 13–14).

It becomes clear that perceiving water as an active player subverts anthropocentric perspectives and questions the nature-culture-divide. Consequently, Oppermann unfolds possible "counternarratives to anthropocentrism" (Oppermann 2023: 35) activating new and more ethical modes of water-human relations. At this juncture, she engages with Jane Bennett's argument that a strategic cultivation of anthropomorphism is able to counter anthropocentric perspectives. To cite Bennett:

> I will emphasize, even overemphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in human artifacts) in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought. We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism – the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature – to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world (Bennett 2010: xvi).

This kind of "thinking with water" in search of liquid stories becomes very striking in Oppermann's perspective on rivers, framing them as "narrative agencies whose stories trace maps of environmental contamination" (Oppermann 2023: 45). These insights, on the one hand, are inspired by actual discussions and movements within the field of environmental justice that contest the status of rivers as legal subjects.[7] On the other hand, the approach of Oppermann is based on ideas from material ecocriticism understanding aquatic elements as "vital materialities producing […] configurations of meanings and narratives that we read as material stories" (Opperman 2023: 24). In a broader sense, and not necessarily linked to ideas of material ecocriticism, the liquid materiality of rivers connects with the concept of bodies of water that attributes not only corporeality but also a notion of vulnerability to rivers.[8]

Most of those approaches, besides forwarding the idea of rivers as persons, highlight the relation of human and nonhuman bodies of water in immersive terms. In this manner, Ailton Krenak, representant of the Indigenous Krenak people in Brazil, foregrounds a watery model of being that is incorporated by rivers: "*Sejamos água, em matéria e espírito, em nossa movência e capacidade de mudar de rumo, ou estaremos perdidos*" [Let us be water, in matter and spirit, in our movement and ability to change course, or we will be lost] (Krenak 2022: 27).[9] This idea is shared by the approach of Blackmore,

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7 For a closer look at the subjecthood and legal status of rivers, see for example Elizabeth Gallón Droste and Matthias Kramm (Gallon Droste 2021; Kramm 2020).

8 For different approaches to the corporeal materiality of water in the sense of "bodies of water", see for example Barros and Rabanal 2023; Blackmore 2020, 2022; Krenak 2022; Neimanis 2017.

9 All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

who claims: "*Apuesto a que por ahí se puede llegar a ser más río*" [I bet that's where you can get to be more river] (Blackmore 2020: 19).[10]

Moreover, at a second scale, forms of thinking with water pay special attention to a human-nonhuman entanglement based on the idea of a relational ontology that is particularly productive in theoretical perspectives from Latin America. At this juncture, Arturo Escobar, in his idea of *sentipensar con la tierra* [feelthink with the earth] (Escobar 2014), strengthens both the intellectual and the emotional dimension of this relationship and underlines the fact that in many non-Western societies there is no nature-culture divide. Further perspectives of relational ontologies can also be found in the approaches by Marisol de la Cadena, who refers to earth-beings (La Cadena 2015), Astrid Ulloa, who underwrites the political capacity of nonhuman actors opening spaces for producing knowledge otherwise (Ulloa 2017: 72), and Stacy Alaimo, who coins the term transcorporeality in order to refer to a bodily embeddedness in environment decentring the human position (Alaimo 2010).

In a third line of thought, there are several approaches (mostly, but not exclusively from media studies), that reflect upon the epistemic and mediatic implications of thinking with water: In her book *Wild Blue Media*, Melody Jue states: "This epistemic shift is about cultivating a certain humility, aware of how mediation might seem otherwise from another embodied point of view in the milieu of the ocean" (Jue 2020: 22).[11] Jue is turning here to what Macarena Gómez-Barris, on her part, has grasped as "a submerged viewpoint" (Gómez-Barris 2017: xiv), that enables "to see differently and to question what lies beneath the visible world of the extractive zone" (Gómez-Barris 2017: xv). In this manner, thinking with water reveals and catalyses nonutilitarian and decolonial perspectives besides ecocritical, posthuman and new materialist approaches relating not only to water, but to nature and environment in general. And it is a mode of thinking that, in a self-reflexive way, questions Western configurations of epistemology, since it foregrounds multisensory modes of knowing and knowledge that engage not only with visuality, but also with the tactile and the auditory dimension. Moreover, thinking with water calls for recognizing the limitations of (human) knowledge, since, as Astrida Neimanis claims, "no waters are fully knowable" (Neimanis 2017: 147).

3.   Aquatic Agency in Recent Chilean Documentary Film

The films analysed in the following mostly deal with the cosmovision of the Mapuche people as well as with extractivist interventions in central and southern Chile and in other

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10 On the immersive experience of swimming see also Mentz 2020.

11 Jue illustrates here the statement of John Durham Peters: "Environments are also media" (Peters 2015: 3).

regions of Latin America representing two discursive contexts of watery elements that are antagonistically linked. Before proceeding with the analysis of the documentaries it is necessary to give an overview over both thematic fields.

Mapuche is the name of the Indigenous people who live in the central and southern part of Chile, and in the south-west of Argentina. According to the Chilean census of 2002, about 4% of the population (600,000 people out of 15 million) identifies as Mapuche. They resisted the Spanish conquest and in 1641 the Spanish Crown recognized their independence. After Chile and Argentina had won independence from Spain in 1816 and 1818, these territories were invaded by republican military forces; the Mapuche population was killed or confined in reservations and lost their original territory. Until today the Mapuche are suffering social and racial discrimination, cultural assimilation, and territorial disputes. Their language, Mapudungún, has about 250,000 speakers.

Juan Ñanculef Huaiquinao, the first representant of the Mapuche people who has published a study about the Mapuche cosmovision (Montecino 2016: 12), explains the etymological significance of the term Mapuche as follows: "In Mapudungún, '*mapu*' means 'land' and '*che*' means 'people'" (Huaiquinao 2016: 24–25).[12] Thus, from an etymological perspective it becomes obvious that the tight connection between nature and human is at the core of Mapuche identity.[13] The Mapuche see themselves as part of nature. This close entanglement becomes visible as well in the fact that for Mapuche people natural elements, such as mountains, snow, beaches or rivers, the wind and the fog, are sacred, inducing a deep respect and ethical attitude towards the environment (Huaiquinao 2016: 52). They establish a special relationship with natural elements by talking to them while they roam through nature (Huaiquinao 2016: 52; Chihuailaf 1999: 58). Moreover, in Mapuche cosmovision, the *newen* [energy] consists of four elements – ülcha [air], *weche* [fire], *fücha* [water] and *kuze* [land] – that are in a dynamic constellation, turning to positive or negative energetic flows (Huaiquinao 2016: 47). These four energetic elements are represented by four persons (a young woman and a young man, and an old woman and an old man) highlighting contiguous relations between the human and the nonhuman as they take the animation, personhood, and consciousness of nature as a basis.

The search for an ethical and balanced relation between human and nature in Mapuche cosmovision is counteracted by extractivist forces. Especially in the southern region of Chile, during the last decades several mines and hydroelectric plants have invaded territories mostly inhabited by Mapuche people. These globally conducted invasions

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12 For further insights into the notion of Mapuche, see also Pina Ravest (2018: 10) and Chihuailaf (1999: 19).

13 The word *mapudungún* means "language of the Earth". As Loncón Antileo states, Mapudungún is spoken manly in three regions of the central South of the country: Región del Bio-Bio, Araucanía and Región de los Lagos (Loncón: 4).

have worst implications for the environment since they cause contamination and loss of water, flora, and fauna, also signifying a loss of medicinal and alimentary plants, as well as displacement of ecosystems and people (Gutiérrez 2016: 13; Torres-Salinas et al. 2017: 150). Moreover, these extractivist activities destroy sacred places of the Mapuche (Manque 2016: 49; Gutiérrez 2016: 13). Since the establishment of the so-called Código del Agua [Water Code] which privatized watery exploitation rights in 1981, during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, water has become a crucial element of national, cultural, social and ethnic disputes in Chile (Manque 2016: 50; Torres-Salinas et al. 2017: 150; Etzold 2023: 82–83).[14] Facing this asymmetrical situation that can be interpreted as neocolonial continuance of exploitation and destruction of Indigenous territories and the respective ecosystems, during the last years several initiatives and movements have been founded aiming to restore water to the status of a common property.[15]

The films we will now focus on are symptoms of an increasing cinematographic interest in the documentary genre linked to activist but also to experimental approaches in the works of a young generation of Chilean filmmakers.[16] Hence, the films dialogue with notions of direct cinema in the sense that they frame the role of the camera as an observer giving agential power to the elements on screen. Furthermore, they reflect forms of environmental filmmaking and ecocinema focusing on nonhuman viewpoints and in so doing expanding watching habits that rely on the subject/object divide (Paszkiewicz 2021: 15). All of the films discussed here deal with water in form of rivers. These sort of bodies of water until now have often been focused on in fictional literature and film, since they display a highly symbolic and a special chronotopic potential because of their dynamic fluidity, that is, their quality of a constant movement from a source to the ocean. In the following, rivers are coming into sight as bodies of water in contact with humans, incorporating an active role as narrative entities in these sometimes-conflictual encounters. Focusing on sound, texture, and self-reflexive modes, the analysis will scrutinize how the films stage an aquatic agency and how they (re)frame human-nonhuman relations.

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14 For insights into "wars on water", see Shiva (2004), who analyses these conflicts as results of ecological crisis motivated by commercial reasons.

15 See for instance the initiative MODATIMA, which is fighting for a hydro-commons agenda with a more democratic, egalitarian, and sustainable government of water in Chile (MODATIMA 2021). Moreover, see Blackmore (2022) for artistic interventions on the hydro-commons.

16 In this sense, of course, the films respond to different purposes and are oriented to different audiences. They have a duration between five minutes and 71 minutes and are available on the open access-platforms cinechile.cl and ondamedia.cl. I would like to thank the directors, Álvaro Hamamé, Cristóbal Zapata, and Cristián Tàpies for kindly permitting me to use screen shots of the films in this working paper.

3.1 *Que hablen los ríos (El agua como territorio)* (2021) by Álvaro Hamamé

The short documentary *Que hablen los ríos (El agua como territorio)* [May the Rivers Speak: Water as Territory] by Álvaro Hamamé premiered in 2021 and has a duration of five minutes (Hamamé 2021). It gives a voice to the Queuco river localized in central Chile, in the region of Alto Bío Bío. A wide shot opens the film and a bird-eye's view shot with a drone camera focuses the Queuco's flow through a landscape with mountains and forests. After some seconds, the river's voice sets in, presenting itself in Mapudungún. It is striking that this female voice (spoken by Valeska Figueroa) does not address the audience but the community of other rivers. The speech is translated into Spanish in subtitles: "*Escuchen ríos de la tierra, escúchenme, cuerpos de cristalina que bajan de los montes, que viven en la entraña de la alta nube, soy el río Queuco y voy a contar una historia*" [Listen rivers of the earth, listen to me, crystalline bodies that come down from the mountains that live in the bowels of the high cloud, I am the Queuco River and I am going to tell you a story] (Hamamé 2021: 0:25).

Figure 1. One of the first bird-eye's view shots of the Queuco

Source: Hamamé (2021: 0:53). Still image used for this paper with permission from the director.

During the film, this aquatic Mapudungún voice will occupy a central position, accompanied by numerous medium shots of the flowing water that also capture the swooshing sound of the river. Besides appealing to other rivers, the Queuco addresses mountains, valleys and forests, introducing itself as a natural element of Mapuche cosmovision with a crucial function for culture, memory and identity building (Hamamé 2021: 3:08). In a further step, Queuco explains that this cosmogonic and ecological system is threatened by a hydropower project, called Carretera Hídrica [Water

Highway]. This project aims at rerouting the river in order to satisfy the water needs of mining and agriculture in the north of the country. The shift to extractive logics, framed as invasion and antagonistic forces, is accompanied by the decolorization of the shots, filming mining activities in shades of brown (Hamamé 2021: 1:37). This brutal cut then is followed by the explanations of Néstor Queupil, Mapuche and member of the Comunidad Cauñicu, who – retaking the river's voice – refers to elements of Mapuche culture and cosmovision opposing them to *un pensamiento occidental* [a Western form of thinking] linked to capitalist and utilitarian modes (Hamamé 2021: 2:25). These explanations are illustrated on their side by wide shots of storage dams and deforestation, filmed once again with a drone camera. In a sort of polyphonic orchestration, the explanations by Néstor Queupil in the following alternate with the river's female voice and, furthermore, are presented with a soundscape of the flowing river. This swoosh is constantly present, although it varies in volume. Sometimes it adopts a quality of voice-over, conducing to a sort of watery translation of Néstor's explanations. At this juncture, we can observe numerous moments of dialogue and translation between human and nonhuman actors in the film. To this effect, it is crucial that the Queuco keeps the last word; the river returns to its words of the beginning, addressing once again the other rivers of the region: "*Escuchen, ríos de la tierra. Escúchenme, cuerpos de agua cristalina que bajan de los montes. Hijos de montañas y volcanes. Nuestras aguas son territorio. Son un Newen (Fuerza) que no puede detenerse*" [Listen, rivers of the earth, listen to me, crystalline bodies that come down from the mountains. Children of mountains and volcanoes. Our waters are territory. They are a *Newen* (Force) that cannot be stopped] (Hamamé 2021: 4:27).

By repeating almost the same words, the Queuco emphasizes a watery kinship and appeals to a sense of collectivity of natural elements. Furthermore, it creates an intra-filmic memory from which humankind seems to be excluded. At this juncture, it is striking that the film aims at a sort of communicative community that, at the same time, strengthens Mapuche cosmovision and ethical behaviour with nature and denunciates neoliberal extractive activities. In this manner, it simultaneously aims at explaining and criticizing. The Spanish paratext that appears at the end pursues this double goal (Hamamé 2021: 4:37). It contextualizes the formerly enunciated words, dialogues and

translations referring to the Carretera Hídrica and framing this project clearly as part of the Chilean extractivist model.[17]

In total, the filmic aesthetic transmits an antagonistic view in a twofold manner: On the one hand, it operates with the prevalence of wide shots with natural elements filling in the screen; in these shots we rarely see humans. On a receptive level, this high number of wide and aerial view shots induces a sense of loneliness in the audience, reducing them to onlookers not being immersed in the narrative of the film. On the other hand, the detailed filmic work on the sound is crucial to strengthen oppositional perspectives. By emphasizing the watery sound (and by giving the Queuco river a personal voice operating with its narrative subjecthood), the film creates aquatic alliances where confluences turn into counter/fluences.[18]

Thus, water is acting, above all, as an acoustic force in the film revealing bodies of water as bodies of sound and of language. As we have seen, the swooshing sound is almost omnipresent in a lot of shots accompanying, underlining, and translating the explanations in Mapudungún. But this aquatic acoustic is much more than a simple ambient sound – it becomes a protagonist sound. The Spanish language, in contrast, is relegated to the subtitles. The internal language politics of the film can also be seen as the result of having dispensed with a mediating narrator's voice. It becomes clear that the river and the Mapuche people are speaking with the same tongue, whereas the Spanish language (the language of the conqueror) only appears in the background and in written form (as subtitles and paratexts). It is silenced.

In addition, this linguistic concertation links the Mapudungún and the aquatic sounds directly to notions of materiality and corporeality: *El agua como territorio* [Water as territory], this is the self-description of the Queuco who is constructing a liquid connection to further *cuerpos cristalinas* [crystalline bodies] in a gesture of reappropriation, demarcation, and resistance. In this process of self-affirmation, the recognition of the vulnerability of territory and identity becomes a starting point for a collective human-nonhuman force that faces exploitation and devastation.

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17 White letters on a black background state the following: "*La Carretera hídrica pretende transvasar las aguas del Queuco para abastecer tierras entre las regiones del Bío Bío y Atacama. El mega proyecto, con una extensión de más de 2500 km, contempla la construcción de canales abiertas, tuberías, embalses y estaciones de bombeo para regar un millón de hectáres destinadas a la agroindustria y suministrar agua a la creciente demanda hídrica de las explotaciones mineras, consolidando el modelo extractivista de Chile*" [The Water Highway aims to transfer the waters of the Queuco to supply land between the Bío Bío and Atacama regions. The megaproject, more than 2,500 km long, contemplates the construction of open channels, pipelines, reservoirs, and pumping stations to irrigate one million hectares for agribusiness and supply water to the growing water demand of mining operations, consolidating Chile's extractive model].

18 In various sequences, the aquatic acoustic is accompanied by music in order to create a certain atmosphere and induce emotions. The musical element, however, is not decisive for the creation of liquid alliances, which is why it is not discussed in detail here.

3.2 *Mapocho* (2008) by Cristóbal Zapata

Similar to the documentary by Álvaro Hamamé, the film *Mapocho*[19] by Cristóbal Zapata (Zapata 2008), stages a river as a protagonist, even though by employing other filmic strategies.[20] The documentary has a duration of 24 minutes and was first screened at the Festival Internacional de Cine Viña del Mar where it won the Poa Prize for Best Short Film Documentary. Furthermore, it won the Adoc Prize and was presented also at the Festival Internacional de Cine Valdivia.

By dispensing with a human narrative voice and further linguistic elements, such as paratexts or subtitles, the enunciative competence in the film lies alone in the images of the river. Mapocho tells its own life story from birth in the source in the Andes to death in the estuary in the Maipo that flows into the Pacific Ocean. Adopting an aquatic point of view, the storytelling and its narrative patterns are framed as a focusing on crucial modifications and experiences in the river's life, such as the pure birth, followed by the initial flow that later faces pollution, enclosure, and asymmetric water-human relations. Thus, the agential aspect is linked to a narrative capacity. The very notion of a storytelling force of the river subverts the nature-culture divide in hegemonic modes of thinking. Even though the film does not refer explicitly to Indigenous cosmovision, it foregrounds agential aspects of water that communicate with ideas of animism and consciousness of nature.

The narrative nuclei are mediated by a filmic aesthetic that concentrates, above all, on three elements: textures, still pictures and a constant alternation of wide shots and close-ups. The birth of the river is introduced by the establishing shot of El Plomo, covered with snow and shrouded in mist. The image remains in silence, and in a wide shot the camera only focuses a bird filming the sky in a low-angle (Zapata 2008: 0:52). The following sequences offer close-ups of icicles and of stones covered with moss (Zapata 2008: 1:35); these images are partly accompanied by classical music. This detailed perspective allows the viewer to perceive the textures of the natural elements. The nascent river presents itself in the smallest elements, when the following close-ups capture the first waterdrops running down the icicles (Zapata 2008: 2:22). Now, the music is turning more vivid.

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19 The Mapocho River has a length of 120 km. It rises in the Andes, in the El Plomo mountain, and crosses the metropolitan region and the capital Santiago de Chile before flowing into the Maipo River.

20 The Mapocho River is staged in another short documentary film by Morín Ortiz and Victoria Ramírez, entitled *Todos los ríos dan a la mar* [All Rivers Lead to the Sea] (Ortiz and Ramírez 2016). This film has a duration of 15 minutes and focuses on a poetic journey of the well-known Chilean poetess Cecilia Vicuña.

Figure 2. A close-up of the waterdrops running down the icicles

Source: Zapata (2008: 2:22). Still image used for this paper with permission from the director.

These first sequences of the film establish a special rhythm, not only in terms of speed – the shots in form of still pictures are extremely long, with an average duration of four to five seconds – but also concerning the alternation of wide shots and close-ups. Furthermore, the establishing shots are exemplary for a dramaturgy of materiality that presents the watery element in all of its aggregate states: as snow, ice, mist, and as a liquid element. The notions of materiality and texture obtain a structuring effect, since the surface of other natural elements as well comes into sight in different moments of the film: a tree bark (Zapata 2008: 3:41), sand in the riverbed (Zapata 2008: 6:45), which is reflected by the water, or foam on the water's surface (Zapata 2008: 16:49). At this juncture, the varying materiality of water and other natural elements induces an agential aspect and draws attention to the changing texture of the filmic image. In combination with the close-ups these textures sometimes even seem to quit the image, conferring a modified experience of seeing that involves the sense of touching.

The Mapocho takes its course and enters civilization. According to the ongoing narration, now, a prevalence of wide shots framing convivial situations becomes remarkable: when the camera focuses a mountain landscape, only at a second glance the viewer recognizes a man and a dog standing on a hill, at the right margin of the shot (Zapata 2008: 4:48). Later on, another wide shot captures serpentine roads with a few cars, the only moving elements in the image (Zapata 2008: 5:48). This shot is extremely long with a duration of more than ten seconds. It is a gradual entrance into the human world facing traffic, waste, and extractivist industries (Zapata 2008: 12:12). Now, the river is conducting its course not within, but despite the environment and the film stages symbolic situations of counter/fluences, for example between the flowing river and the

moving cars in Santiago de Chile (Zapata 2008: 8:49). Later on, the camera continues observing the moving body of water in sequences of still pictures, without any technical movement. Only when the Mapocho appears bearing plenty of garbage, the camera tracks the course of the river moving from left to right and adopts the fluvial speed (Zapata 2008: 13:28-14:42).

Finally, the river reaches the ocean. However, the river mouth is not staged as a liberating scene: the loud noise and monotonous movement of several excavators literally have a destructive effect on this potentially confluent scenery (Zapata 2008: 15:50-16:37). The maritime place is filmed by numerous low angle shots capturing the watery perspective in this convivial and inequal setting. It is an inhospitable location – a sign indicates: "*Peligro. Playa inhabilitada*" [Danger. Contaminated beach] (Zapata 2008: 19:18) and people are searching for goods in trash. The last wide shot of the ocean in the setting sun, rather than a conciliatory ending, seems to establish a reproachful looking back, another counterflow, that returns the spectator's gaze.

It is this gaze regime that underwrites the river's narrative subjecthood created by the filmic aesthetic. At the same time, it can be seen as a symbol of the oppositional relationship between the human and the nonhuman world. The three main aesthetic elements of the film highlighted before (textures, still pictures and the alternation of wide shots and close-ups) are also working on a separational mode: they put the audience in an observer position that induces moments of contemplation, referring to notions of Slow Cinema, but also to notions of passivity.

At this juncture, the materiality of water induces an agential aspect and draws attention to the texture of the filmic image. Focusing on textures in a huge number of shots, the film reverses notions of optical visuality itself strengthening the material presence of the image instead of its representational capacity. By this, the film appeals to other forms of seeing (and knowing) that subvert the mostly Western concentration on the sense of vision as a source of knowledge. Thus, it is advancing a haptic visuality (Marks 2000). Following Marks, in this kind of visuality, "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch" (Marks 2000: 162). Furthermore, the continual use of still pictures with a very long duration of five to seven seconds or more creates a confrontational mode with the (passive) observer being exposed to the (lively) river. Since the camera is not moving, in most of the shots the river itself is the only vibrant element.

The alternation of wide shots and close-ups, finally, produces a constant change between a sentiment of loneliness in the spectator and the implication of a symbolic value. However, due to the material focus, this symbolic notion remains mainly undecipherable. Thus, water, in its materiality and narrative capacity, imposes its own

semantic power within the film, from which humankind seems to be excluded, although corporeal proximity is being established especially by the textural close-ups.

3.3 *El Río* (2018) by Cristián Tàpies

The third documentary analysed here is *El Río* [The River] by Cristián Tàpies, screened first at the Festival Internacional de Documentales de Buenos Aires in 2018 (Tàpies 2018). With a duration of 71 minutes, it is much longer than the others. Constructed in form of a logbook, it documents the director's river trip through the Amazonian region, transiting Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil. Thus, in a transnational and transgeographical mode, *El R*ío incorporates many rivers.

The paratext at the beginning informs that the film results from an investigation trip through the Amazonian region in 2014, which the director was able to join. The journey covered 4,500 kilometers between the Ecuadorian Andes and the Marajó Island in Brazil, on the Atlantic Ocean. Furthermore, the paratext refers to the Amazonian region as the "*red hidrográfica más grande del planeta*" [largest hydrographic network on the planet] which is the habitat of ancestral ethnic groups resisting devastation by transnational companies. Thus, the paratextual information frames and positions the documentary as an instrument of defence of biodiversity and Indigenous rights. At this juncture, the rivers traversed during the trip become entities of animation as well as of vulnerability calling for recognizing their subjecthood: "*La Amazonia es un órgano vivo, sus venas son los ríos que fluyen y desangran este cuerpo herido y sus orillas, el gran río y sus profundidades secretas*" [Amazonia is a living organ, its veins are the rivers that flow and bleed this wounded body and its shores, the great river and its secret depths], states the paratext (Tàpies 2018: 0:41).

Like the documentary by Cristóbal Zapata, the film dispenses with a narrator's voice and explores alternative forms of documentary aesthetics. Hence, explanatory and contextual information is referred exclusively by paratexts that present the date and place of different stations of the journey and organize the filmic images chronologically. It is this lineal structure that seems to be inspired by the flowing movement of the multiple rivers traversed. Furthermore, the structural chronology of the film, reflected as well in its division in four chapters, narrates a story of colonization, exploitation and extractivism. The chapter's titles clearly talk of a causal connection underlying this course of destruction: *Invasión* [Invasion], *Colonización* [Colonization], *Explotación* [Exploitation], *Devastación* [Devastation]. At this juncture, within a first line of thought, it is crucial that the film bases its argumentation on a continuity and reiteration of the colonial matrix which is inscribed in nature with the rivers becoming its protagonists. Thus, they become watery witnesses relating to the conception of deep time that focuses

on water as a reservoir of experiences of the past, as well as of future perspectives. At an aesthetic-structural level, as well as at a content level, the idea of an extended colonial thought invading nature, and especially rivers, is illustrated then by forms of intermedial collages and palimpsests that perform confluences of time regimes during the film.

As a second line of thought, and resulting as a consequence of the first, the documentary reveals a human-nature divide that emerges from neocolonial practices. It is crucial that the filmic aesthetic, at the same time, criticizes and deconstructs these practices by presenting the human world, and especially technical innovations, as ridiculous. Innovation then comes into sight as a form of alienation. This kind of inversion of capitalist promises of progress goes hand in hand with acts of resistance rooted in Indigenous activism.

At the beginning of the first chapter, *Invasión*, the viewer is confronted with an historical graphic representation of the *Conquista* [Conquest] (Tàpies 2018: 1:49). A few sequences later, it becomes clear that this painting, far from presenting a remote idea of domination and exploitation, is reactivated in recent times. In a palimpsest gesture, the film presents documentary material that probably dates from the 1950s or 1960s: the English moderator is introducing Dayuma, an Indigenous girl, who is exposed here to a neocolonial gaze (Tàpies 2018: 9:15). The very acts of putting her in front of a camera and talking to her in a language she does not understand are explicit gestures of domination and exploitation. At the same time, documentary filmmaking itself is staged as part of these asymmetrical structures and hegemonic visual regimes. Thus, the film introduces a self-reflective mode of thinking and representation that questions the construction of otherness.

In the following chapter, *Colonización*, the internal time regime is reversed, when the camera captures a river rider perspective into the Parque Nacional Yasuni in Ecuador, an ancestral territory of Indigenous communities in voluntary separation.[21] At this juncture, besides the (fluvial) reflections on the continuity of colonial structures, the film forwards perspectives on Indigenous resistance as acts of territorial demarcation in the present. It is crucial that the camera here becomes an ally, rejecting and subverting the colonial gaze and power by its very position, close to the water's surface.

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21 The paratext informs about the location: "*Territorio ancestral de pueblos en aislamiento voluntario, declarado zona intangible por la constitución ecuatoriana, amenazada por una nueva expansión de la frontera extractivista del petróleo*" [Ancestral territory of peoples in voluntary isolation, declared an intangible zone by the Ecuadorian constitution, threatened by a new expansion of the oil extractivist frontier].

Figure 3. The camera is situated close to the water's surface

Source: Tàpies (2018: 15:38). Still image used for this paper with permission from the director.

Some sequences later, the nature-culture divide is framed as a division between image and sound when a medium shot of the Amazonian forest captures a variety of trees and plants accompanying this still picture with a background sound of human nonverbal noises, such as screaming, crying and sobbing. This acoustic expression of negative emotions is completely out of the visual context framing it as part of a foreign body that may allude to the ancestral populations' suffering in colonial times. Only some minutes later, the camera captures a ridiculous scene in Cabo Pantoja, Peru: under observation by members of the local community, a technician tries to install a telephone system, which finally is not working (Tàpies 2018: 37:18). Here, technical innovation becomes a symptom of neocolonial practices that make nonsense of themselves. At the same time, these shots are alternated with historical ethnographic photographs picturing members of the Indigenous population in a sort of an inventory process.

The chapter on *Explotación* focuses more closely on different extractivist activities of natural resources. In Nauta, 90 kilometres away from Iquitos/Peru, in the ancestral territory of the Cocamas people, the ports have been sold to international oil companies, which led to the contamination of several lakes and rivers (for example the Amazon and the Marañón). The transnational project ISE is one of the biggest industrial invasions in this region that uses hydroelectric plants in order to generate energy. The following chapter on *Devastación* establishes a continuity and a climax of these extractivist practices by presenting blasting procedures near the Amazon, as well as wide shots of the immense Brazilian hydroelectric plant Belo Monte in the Xingu River that are filmed with a camera drone (Tàpies 2018: 1:02:32).

By focusing on a narrative continuity of the colonial matrix as well as its possible fragmentations, turns, suspensions, and subversions, the film explores another form of narrative agency of the river. As mentioned above, the fluid and palimpsestic interrelations between remote and present forms of exploitation and alienation include documentary filmmaking itself. Thus, at the core of the film is a critical questioning of the documentary mode as a manner of ontological and epistemological colonization and as a form of extractivism and appropriation.

The self-reflexive gesture of integrating historical films and photos from the 1920s and also from the 1950s and 1960s indicates limitations of human interaction with nature and with culturally and ethnically different people. In this manner, the documentary clearly demonstrates the moral impotence of dominating the Other through regimes of knowledge that are constructed and documented via a Western camera lens. The very act of framing the river as a protagonist subverts not only the nature-culture divide and its inherent transtemporal (and transnational) asymmetrical structures, but it also counters dominant gestures of filmmaking that privilege the (neocolonial) human gaze as the only visual and narrative subject.

4.   Conclusion – Further Perspectives

To conclude, it can be said that all the films analysed here challenge the notions of documentaries by employing innovative strategies such as dispensing with an off-camera voice (or modifying it), staging nonhuman actors, working on sound and texture and forwarding self-reflexive modes. In sum, these are procedures that decentre the human capacity of narration, adopting Jane Bennett's gesture of using anthropomorphization as an anti-anthropocentric tool (Bennett 2010: xvi). By staging water as an actor, the films look beneath the visible, explore the extractive zone from below and adopt submerged perspectives (Gómez-Barris 2017: xv). Finally, they subvert hegemonic conceptions of knowledge that are connected primarily to the visual sense, as well as to binary regimes. The films therefore deconstruct asymmetric strategies of Othering not only by staging watery actors and reverting narrative capacities, but also by imposing oppositional modes of being and thinking in a constant flowing back.

The documentary *Flow* (Molina 2018) can be referred to here as a final example, where the dynamics of confluence and counter/fluence turn into one, transcending Latin American waterscapes. By this, the film, directed by Nicolás Molina, explores a globalized fluvial space with the Ganges in India and the Bío-Bío in Chile becoming parallelized protagonists. The notion of a liquid conviviality resonates not only in the bifocal perspectives on both of the rivers but as well in the fact that the filmic images, contrary to the films analysed before, capture multiple situations of a respectful and

equitable human-water relation. This more symmetrical connectivity is announced through the paratexts which introduce the watery actors as follows: Concerning the Ganges: "*A sus orillas viven más de 600 millones de personas, equivalente a un 8% de la población mundial*" (Molina 2018: 00:35) [More than 600 million people live on its shores, equivalent to 8% of the world´s population] And referring to the Bío-Bío: "*Sus orillas están habitadas por 500.000 chilenos*" (Molina 2018: 00:55) [Its shores are inhabited by 500,000 Chileans]. Hence, besides their quality of watery actors, both of the rivers clearly appear as aquatic habitats in the films.

The filmic aesthetic works with extremely long shots and slow camera movements, adopting in several sequences a nonhuman viewpoint, with the camera focusing on waterflows or capturing animal perspectives. At the same time, the camera observes the everyday life of the river's residents. The editing process of the parallelized river images stages the alternated shots of the Ganges and the Bío-Bío in a plethora of moments as one single waterbody scenery by dispensing with any contextual information about the location of the captured fluvial movements. Only after some minutes pass is the viewer able to orient his/her perception. The reversal of watching habits, one of the most striking effects of all of the films analysed in this working paper, is implemented in *Flow* mainly by a special orchestration of the filmic sequences. The film title then conveys a self-reflexive layer connecting with the constant confluence of watery as well as of human actors.

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