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Exploring underwater seascapes

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Abstract

The conference held in Brest in 2011 (Musard et al., 2014) marked a step forward for underwater seascape recognition, the term "seascape" being understood within the meaning of the European Landscape Convention, voted in 2000 by the Council of Europe, i.e.: "an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors". This underwater landscape, long imagined, fantasized about or ignored, suddenly emerged in Western culture in the 1950s, with the widespread use of self-contained underwater breathing apparatus and improved underwater filming techniques. From then on, stories became rife in literature, films and comic books, and within only a few decades, representations of this "new realm" morphed into an *oceanic watershed* (Artaud, 2023) that called into question the unrestrained exploitation of marine resources. The early diving tales from this post-war turning point illustrate this ambiguous relationship with underwater landscapes and animals, shifting from predation to empathy.

Keywords: Underwater Seascapes, Wet Ontologies, Diving Experiences

"The sea has always challenged man's mind and imagination; even today, it remains the Earth's last great frontier" (Carson, 1950, p. 19).

1. Introduction

The use of maritime territory and the exploitation of marine and undersea resources increased throughout the 20th century. The First and Second World Wars, which shifted the battlefront underwater, accelerated the exploitation of seabed resources in peacetime, with the development of hydrocarbon exploitation, intensive fishing on the seabed, aquaculture, limestone or sand extraction, offshore wind farms, tidal turbine installations, commercial, military and leisure shipping, underwater telecommunication cables… and waste burial. The current need for rare metals is putting renewed pressure on the environment and deep-sea resources. The underwater world is also a recreational playground. Scuba diving is increasingly popular, and for the tourism industry, underwater landscapes provide the potential for adventure and exotic scenery that are fast declining on land. Against this backdrop

of intensive exploitation and coveted resources, the urgent need for sustainable seabed management cannot be ignored.

The urgent need for better marine resource management conflicts with the idea of a boundless ocean, open to competition and appetites. "For a very long time, the sea found itself in an illusory comfort zone as were other ultra-resources. The sea was conceptualised as *infinite*; the fact that it is *unlimited* or 'boundless', in Shakespeare's own words has encouraged misunderstanding: [...] Inexhaustibility was an illusion, which began to evaporate with the development of mechanization" (Casati, 2022, pp. 182-184). The foreign, and even dangerous nature of marine resources also increases the feeling of inexhaustibility, which is not conducive to empathy and respect. Approaching the marine environment from a landscape and cultural heritage perspective is not self-evident, particularly in the open sea or deep sea, with the notable exception of underwater shipwreck archaeology campaigns.

Understanding social representations and practices with regard to the underwater landscape is key in implementing public resource preservation policies, insofar as social representations are a prerequisite for awareness and therefore for political action (Jolly, 2021). "Facing the current biodiversity crisis and the need to engage people with nature, research in environmental psychology has examined ways to modulate nature connectedness (NC). A number of studies have shown that activities involving physical, emotional and sensory engagement with nature seem to have more effect on NC than do knowledge and theoretical education" (Tribot, 2022). As Anne Sophie Tribot points out, emotional engagement (especially *in visu* through art) and sensory engagement (especially *in situ* through direct contact) are major levers for transforming our relationship with the world.

The (re)connection to nature can take complex, interwoven forms, following a gradient of connections, from the externalised to the internalised, i.e. successively material, experimental, cognitive, emotional, philosophical connections (Ives, 2018). It's this progression that we'll follow in this article, illustrating it with numerous quotes from texts on the experience of underwater seascapes. This gradient of connections is inscribed in a historical temporality, from the first explorations to contemporary philosophical approaches to the ocean. It is also circular, as shown by the evolution of practices from conquest to bodily immersion, echoing empathy. This general movement, developed here on underwater seascapes, has a heuristic scope for approaching other landscapes.

2. Discovering the seabed: the hunter's exploits

Material connections with the submarine world were prominent in early accounts between 1910 and 1950 and were primarily focused on military objectives. The role of submarines in both World Wars, during the battles of the Atlantic, greatly influenced minds and practices. The main technical developments in scuba diving at the turn of the twentieth century took place within the French Navy. In his book "*Premier de plongée"* (1956), Commandant Le Prieur recounts his invention, the self-contained underwater breathing apparatus, adopted in February 1935 by the Minister for the Navy for use on all French Navy vessels and schools...and taken up by Lieutenant Cousteau.

> On August 6, 1926, I presented the Fernez-Le Prieur apparatus at the Tourelles swimming pool in Paris. The first practical self-contained breathing apparatus without any connection with the surface was born. [...] In June 1939, Lieutenant Cousteau, who had been interested in scuba diving for two years, came to me and asked to see all my equipment used by the Navy. [...] When the war ended, I was in for a big surprise. The Navy had simply discarded my underwater breathing apparatus with full face mask, replacing it by the Cousteau-Gagnan open-circuit scuba diving apparatus, despite the drawbacks of the mouthpiece for the safety of divers suffering from nitrogen narcosis or deep-sea intoxication, and the absence of a pressure gauge permanently indicating the compressed air supply pressure. [...] Once he became famous, I heard no more from Cousteau (Le Prieur, 1956, pp. 177-180).

This use of the marine world in wartime was preceded and followed by the search for game.

Underwater "hunting" was the freedivers' primary incentive and is central to the first accounts of underwater world exploration.

> Man slipped in stealthily. To kill. Armed with a crossbow, a mask over his eyes, holding his breath, he launched himself into the water in pursuit of the fish. Underwater hunting isn't just a sporting event. It decided the greatest adventure of the twentieth century: underwater exploration [...]. This was the first step in the conquest of the aquatic depths, the next challenge facing our civilization (Diolé, 1954, p. 37).

There are many diving stories from the 1950s and 1960s. They mostly share the same images and imaginary world (Camus, 2021). Underwater exploration had the attraction of the unexplored frontier, a new Far West, the *Far Deep*. "Does the idea of the *frontier*, the existential dimension of a struggle with the wild, the ambivalence of a natural world which is to be tamed but at the same time is expected to resist domination, characterise only the American people's experience of the new world, or does it define a broader perspective?" (Artaud, 2023, p. 36). Naturally, the narratives focus on the explorer, the adventurer, the hero conqueror, not only of the seabed but also of its wildlife. The idea of domination is clearly expressed, as is the pride of having overcome danger and fear (Figure 1). The thrill of anguish is described in the face of the seabed's sublime beauty, the pride of the victor whose achievement is measured by the resistance of his prey.

> He is happy, quite simply, to broaden the extent of his penetration, the breadth of his knowledge, he takes pride in being an explorer, he plants his personal flag of possession everywhere, he colonises areas that he considers his own. He gradually becomes the true king of his hard-won possessions. [...] For me, this is *the* Experience of modern times, the only one that enables men to surpass themselves, the almost religious feeling of total communion with nature. [...] With every stroke of a fin, you discover life up close, a detail of nature, a secret of the universe: you are potentially in danger and in constant admiration. I know of nothing comparable except perhaps big game hunting, when you are downwind and lurking in the undergrowth, and you can see, at a stone's throw, a herd of giraffes, a family of elephants, a lion or a herd of hartebeests, right next to you, oblivious of your presence (Doukan, 1954, pp. 191-197).

In underwater hunting, primarily practiced as a sport or leisure, the predatory impulse seems irrepressible. The will to win is explicit, as is the desire to share one's exploits with the whole world.

> The grouper is there, three feet away at the end of my rifle, slightly inclined and trying to blend in with the rock. I can't make out its head and, reasonably, I shouldn't be attacking it from this position. Yet almost immediately, my harpoon penetrates the grouper head-on; simultaneously I drop my rifle, grab the harpoon and pull with all my strength, with my shoulder against the rock. The grouper leaps under the pain and inflates, its powerful dorsal fin fighting against my efforts: thirty seconds, forty seconds, I resurface, out of breath (Foucher-Créteau, 1955, p. 26).

Cousteau's team's early expeditions also conveyed this relationship with the underwater world based on conquest and predation.

> Someone on the *Calypso* reported manta rays, the giant rays with two large horns and a thin tail. I jumped into the dinghy with Saout. [...] Saout rowed, I wanted to harpoon them but the mantas dived. [...] They handed me my Mauser war rifle and the bullets I had cut to turn into dum-dum bullets. [...] Saout harpooned the beast, which wasn't putting up much of a fight, so I shot it in the wing. We saw blood, but it didn't seem to show much of a reaction. Jacques called, asking to film from the aft observation chamber (Dumas,1974, p. 90).

Figure 1. "This 80-kilo shark was defeated only after an hour-long fight". Source: Foucher-Créteau, 1955, pp. 64b, 80b.

This conquest is first and foremost, and almost exclusively, male, in a sexist relationship to the sea, sometimes expressed as naively as it is crudely:

> It is in fact the female sea that, we assume, gave rise to life under the action of the male sun, around two billion years ago. [...] The instruments of rape [title of the chapter]. The greatest obstacle to man's penetration of the marine element is his inability to breathe underwater (Romanovsky, 1959, pp. 6-10).

Scuba diving, as it was practiced in its early days in Europe, exacerbated the diver's manly power. Until the 1990s, few women practiced diving, and they were subject to sexist comments, as is the case with many physically demanding sports (e.g. rugby). The rantings of a doctor in a diving manual published in 1987 illustrate this mindset towards women's bodies:

> There is a need to take into consideration how the female sex has gradually come to participate in so-called manly sports. [...] Questions have arisen about the very specific problem of the aesthetics of the female body. Three aspects have emerged. Masculinisation: deemed harmful by some, the masculinisation of the body, with increased muscle development, and behavior. Feminisation: sought by others, on the contrary, with high, firm breasts, flat stomachs and slimmer figures. Aspects of self-esteem: in an activity deemed high-risk to offset aesthetic devaluation (Splichal, 1987, p. 240).

Like on-land hunters, underwater hunters pride themselves on being close to nature, on being the first to observe it closely and to discover the behaviour of different species, and even to understand their habits. As with terrestrial environmental policies, the necessary beginnings of a fragile collaboration are taking shape.

> After going through the hunting phase, divers understood the role they could play in understanding the seas. They took an interest in everything they saw, caught on camera, noted and recounted what they had seen at the bottom of the sea, and they gradually became aware of their importance in the scientific field. At first skeptical, scientists became interested in and paid more attention to the divers' stories (Romanovsky, 1955, p. 191).

Poor knowledge of the marine environment and of the species and ecosystems meant that divers' descriptions were often quite simplistic. Lacking both scientific foundations and the heritage of ancestral knowledge, they oscillated between analogies with terrestrial landscapes and lyrical flights of fancy.

> Suddenly, I find myself in a different world altogether, completely foreign to land-based landscapes, in a realm that only few have set eyes on. I am now swimming among a forest of coral. [...] I'm awe-struck by the spectacle before my very eyes. The top part of this fairytale forest is populated by a host of delicate, tender elves, small multicolored fish, with tiny bright eyes that are all in motion, dancing from one branch to another, and moving in a whirling walz-like motion, through the enchanted grove (Hass, 1952. p. 27).

Philippe Diolé, a keen observer, writer and co-author of seven books with Jacques-Yves Cousteau, was one of the first to highlight the difficulty of describing underwater landscapes, and to criticize how easy it is to describe the seabed not only with land-based vocabulary, but even more so from a land-based *perspective*.

> Our past history and inherited experience have deterred us from accepting this magnificent gift that the 20th century has bestowed upon us. Forest-dwelling ancestors gave us the eyes that betray us in the water. Hunters bequeathed us our ears that hurt when we dive, and our hearing which is useless underwater. [...] Fear blended with ignorance accompanies us for a long time in this area where we do not yet know how to make out dangerous beasts from harmless ones, nor even a piece of seaweed from an animal (Diolé, 1953, p. 17).

> What the diver sees, be it Posidonia meadows, Laminaria undergrowth or caves, has little to do with what we see on land. When we apply to marine life a vocabulary shaped by centuries of agricultural activity, it is for want of a better word and out of approximation. I've long dreamed of banishing these 'gardens', 'fields' and 'bushes' from our vocabulary, as they are more misleading than

> evocative, but words are lacking to express the truth of the depths (Diolé, 1954, pp. 17-18).

The description of underwater landscapes is still an exploratory field of research in public policy, which has focused for so long on terrestrial landscapes. Thus, the landscape atlases produced by all the signatory countries of the Council of Europe's Landscape Convention (2000) only rarely venture onto the foreshore, and only exceptionally onto the seabed, even on highly anthropised coastlines.

Rather prophetically, given artists' current attraction for the maritime world and/or the objects and materials it produces, Diolé uses poetry to approach the reality of underwater landscapes.

> Pending scientific definitions, poetry is the least misleading language to depict a reality that is still poorly understood and eludes reason. That is why underwater, poets take precedence even over scientists. We need writers and poets in the depths of the sea just as much as we need biologists and geologists: to help us unravel the complexity of what we see, to provide us with convenient intellectual instruments (Diolé, 1953, p. 168).

3. Media coverage of underwater landscapes: from curiosity to empathy

> At first, fish were targets for me – moving, diverse, attractive targets. Later, I saw species, and was interested in studying them. Later still, I discovered fish as individuals, and this was greatly satisfying for me (Dumas, 1978, p. 7).

This excerpt from a book by Frédérique Dumas, Jacques-Yves Cousteau's fellow traveler, provides a true illustration of the shift referred to above (Ives, 2018) from externalized (material, experiential) connections with nature, to internalised connections, first at the cognitive then at the emotional level.

In this transition, the marine environment's aesthetic properties play a major role, emphasized throughout the literature, and even the most technical descriptions of diving equipment or underwater navigation devote a few introductory lines to it. The extraordinary diversity of wildlife, the strangeness of shapes exacerbated by the movements of the water, the magic of light piercing the surface – all of this is a source of amazement, as intact as it was at the beginning of the history of underwater diving described by the "*Premier de plongée*".

> A plant fairyland, magnified by the optical properties of water, dances before my eyes, amazed by so much beauty. Among the seaweed, hundreds of fish of all sizes are swimming about, with colours and designs that I had only seen so far in the Monaco aquarium (Le Prieur, 1956, p. 145).

This aesthetic emotion paves the way for positive feelings and is a powerful vehicle for empathy with marine creatures (Figure 2), as common, paradoxically, as it is amongst hunters.

> This setting makes me feel that I'm no longer in a foreign, hostile environment, but among happy, cheerful creatures who are in no way hostile towards me. But soon the need for air puts an end to the incursion into this vast world. I cease all movement, and my body rises of its own accord, as if pushed by a kind hand (Hass, 1952, p. 27).

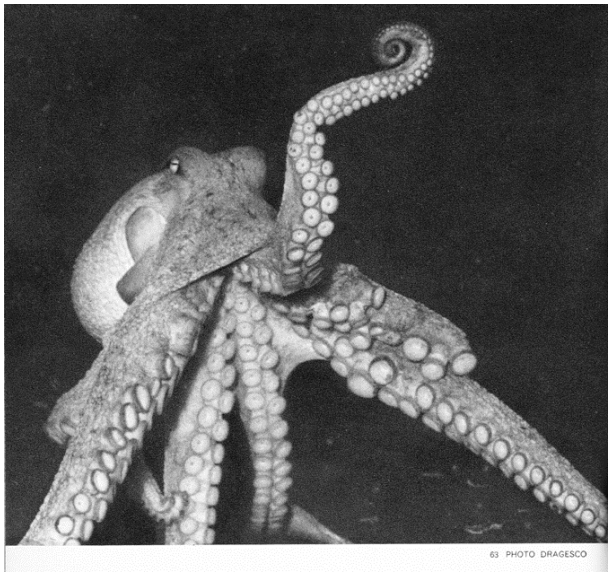

Figure 2. "Intelligent, sensitive and, I believe, affectionate, the octopus is perhaps man's next friend. But will man be able to earn this friendship?". Source: Diolé, 1954.

References to the beauty of underwater seascapes are common and soon became part of the experience in diving circles. “The beauty of nature is a fundamental aspect of the human relationship with the natural world and has been extensively studied under the prism of engagement with nature’s beauty, *i.e.* experiencing positive emotional reactions in response to the perceived beauty of nature” (Tribot, 2022).

Art is not the only or even key intermediary in the perception of the landscape or seascape; other professional practices and everyday uses also provide proof of the poetic appreciation of our environment as emphasized by Yves Luginbühl: “The process of *artialisation* proposed by Alain Roger is operational when it applies to academic culture, that of canonical aesthetics, recognised by the world of Art. Culture is also knowledge of one’s surroundings, organised and thought out by individuals and societies, in their relationship with the materiality of nature and with other beings, as in the way each person experiences the living environment and the search for wellbeing” (2012, p. 56). By placing the question of the perception of landscape in the field of social relations and not only in that of cultural representations, we move towards the geography of emotions, and the non-representational approach which has developed over the past twenty years (Thrift, 2007; Wood et al., 2004). Divers are not necessarily great consumers or producers of seabed images, even though these underwater seascapes conjure up intense feelings and emotions and their experience of discovering these surroundings can leave a lasting mark on their lives.

This perception feeds on and is fed into by representations of the underwater landscape, which abound in literature, films, comic strips and photography. Jules Verne led the way in 1870 with *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and Hergé’s 1944 album The Adventures of Tintin, *The Treasure of Rackham the Red*, became a popular icon (Le Dû-Blayo, 2018), followed by numerous authors who have greatly diversified the range of representations of underwater landscapes in the cinema industry (Le Dû-Blayo, 2014; Chauvaud F. et al., 2023). For a long time, comics have had the great advantage of not having to go underwater to create their images. They are free of all the technical and economic constraints to which the cinema is subjected, including studio reconstruction or computer-generated imagery.

In the post-war period, Jacques-Yves Cousteau played a major role in introducing images of underwater seascapes to the general public, with the release of his first feature film in 1947: *Silent landscapes*. The documentary film *The Silent World*, made in 1956 with Louis Malle, which won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival and an Oscar in the United States, had a huge impact, paving the way for all styles of underwater cinema, from Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975) to Jean-Luc Besson’s *Grand Bleu* (1988) (Cohen M., 2022). How all these images influence our representations of underwater seascapes still remains to be investigated and analysed.

The release of James Cameron’s film “The Way of Water”, part two of *Avatar*, in December 2022, is highly symptomatic of the stereotypes shared and disseminated about underwater landscapes (translucent water, diverse and colourful ecosystems), in contrast to the artistic explorations of photographer Nicolas Floc’h, who reveals in black and white the presence of majestic algae and raises the questions: “How do we look at the ocean? Why is it that the reality of what we see is so often at odds with the iconography of this environment? What imaginary world can we build on which reality?” (Floc’h, 2022, p. 14).

These underwater depictions, from *Nemo’s World* to *Avatar2*, take over from the fascination and even sublime awe expressed by the first divers by consolidating the representation of a *familiar* underwater realm, inhabited by intelligent, sensitive, friendly non-human beings. “A new affective dimension emerged at the turn of the 1970s, particularly evident in marine species. [...] A form of biophilia took hold in the oceans, where a profound change in the perception of animals was at play. With the emergence of documentary films and marine tourism geared towards wildlife, the hostile feelings that had previously been aroused by wild species are fading” (Artaud, 2023, p. 194).

4. Immersion and sharing

Exploring the seabed is a new adventure beyond the discovery of new landscapes, new species and new climates, as was the case with other unexplored frontiers. The undersea environment projects us into another dimension, another matter, a tangible, moving, active, load-bearing volume (Steinberg, 2015). "Wet ontology commits us to re-establishing the three-dimensionality of a sea hitherto considered from its surface" (Artaud, 2023, p. 186).

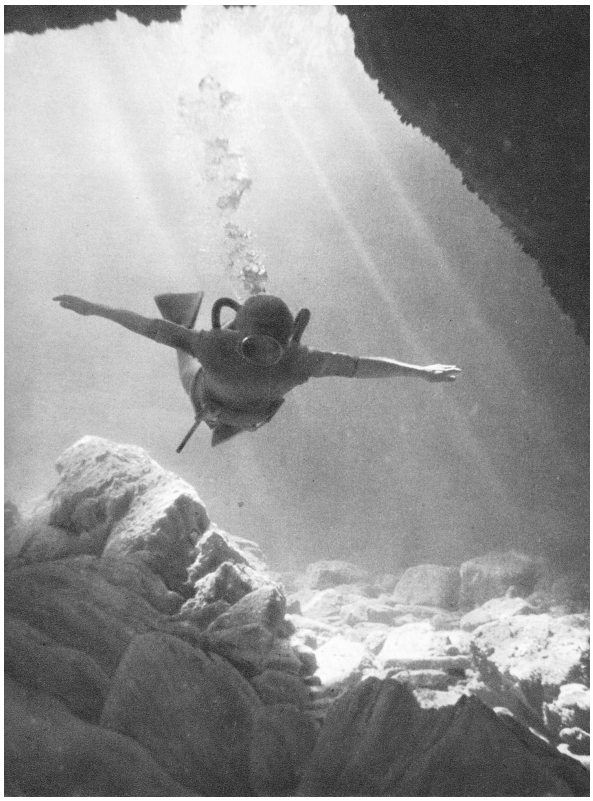

Figure 3. "The pleasure of swimming freely in open water". Source: Diolé, 1954.

It is a fundamental upheaval in our relationship with space, a three-dimensional geography that disrupts our landmarks and prompts us to review our mapping principles. While we are accustomed to using a two-dimensional map, we struggle to imagine this volume of life (and even more to represent it), to understand its diversity and limits. From the surface, the sea is *bottomless*, an infinite receptacle for our waste – especially radioactive waste – an inexhaustible resource for our insatiable appetite for consumption, the abyssal depths of our fears (Carson, 1950). From *within*, immersed in the body of water, the reversal of perspective is inescapable, as is the realisation that this hyper-connected ocean world is fragile.

Learning to dive, whether freediving or scuba diving, is mostly a matter of learning to move in a new and increased vertical axis, mastering a balance in *open water* that is adapted to the pressure, and descending *into the deep blue sea*. The first divers' accounts depict this radical change, which we only really grasp in the practice of immersion, the experience of this three-dimensionality.

> Until now, divers have only been able to move by sinking vertically along a ladder or cable, or by walking on the bottom, leaning forward, without any kind of agility. Therefore, being able to swim effortlessly between two waters, with the exhilarating impression of being able, like a fish, to move in any position, seems amazing to me (Le Prieur, 1956, p. 146).

Finding deliverance from the gravity that binds us to the ground forces us to adapt our balance and our movements, while the loss of our usual bodily landmarks destabilises us both literally and figuratively, and calls for humility (Figure 3). In the water, we must remain modest: we are poor aquatic animals, but we are also, and always will be, novices amazed by the new sensations and unprecedented capacities for movement.

> Divers should be the subjects of experimental psychology. I'm first and foremost thinking of the old spatial issue. This notion is not innate in human beings, but is learned and remains relative for each individual. Now that our experience encompasses the underwater world, our relationship with the outside world will never be the same again. The time has come to reconsider mental mechanisms that have operated identically since the dawn of mankind. It would be worth taking a close look (Diolé, 1953, p. 17).

The underwater environment is no longer just an area for economic activity or scientific observations; it is increasingly being taken over for discovery and sporting activities, particularly

scuba diving. The experience of underwater landscapes is a special one: the contact with the water, the pressure felt on and throughout the body, the awareness and sounds of breathing, the intensity of sounds (water being a more conductive medium than air), weightlessness (if controlled) and three-dimensional mobility: this is a landscape where bodily involvement is important. Presence in the environment and self-presence are more intense because of the water pressure. Elizabeth Straughan (2012) studied the physical and metaphorical ways of what she calls the 'touch of the water' while diving, the specificity of this tactile experience and its implications for the perception of underwater seascapes.

> A rocking motion and I'm caught in the waves. All my senses are turned upside down: sound is muted, sight is obscured, taste and smell are put to sleep, while the water glides gently over my skin. The human world is just above, but I'm off to the dark waters. My heart slows down and my whole body goes into hibernation to save precious oxygen. [...] I release the last physical and mental tensions and offer myself entirely to the sea. I sink, caught by the depths. I let myself be engulfed without resistance and be intoxicated with the happiness of being free, of flying in a silk-like matter, free to let myself be carried towards the abyss, *free to go against the established order* (Néry, 2022, p. 98).

Immersion, through the disruption of perspective and the senses it imposes, shatters the framework of the classical landscape, inherited from the Renaissance period. There is no horizon, the surface disappears as does the seabed, and the body is completely *in* the water. Head down, the diver moves *away from* the surface. Colours fade, while the sensory sensations of pressure and cold increase. Sight loses its supremacy to other senses, and the landscape painting perspective gives way to an unthought universe. "The immersive, multisensory possibilities of the environmental approach serve to challenge narrower scenic approaches, where aesthetic valuing of nature is primarily placed on scenic and visual qualities. The 'scenic model', as it is sometimes called in environmental aesthetics, treats nature as a fixed scene to be gazed at, rather than as environmental and ecological, with all of the dynamic, changing and spontaneous processes that constitute nonhuman nature" (Brady, 2019, p. 255).

The spread of freediving since the 1990s has developed a sensitive approach where the relationship and empathy with the ocean and the creatures living in it contrast with the spirit of virile conquest and the quest for fishing trophies or plundering of wrecks that accompanied the expansion of underwater sports in the 1960s. Freediving is an intense, holistic experience (Figure 4). However, technology-assisted immersion, whether in scuba diving, in a diving suit or in a submersible, also offers a new perspective that frees us from our condition as terrestrial animals. "The *epiphany* in question here is that of a body that is extended by the machine in an essential, *consubstantial* way; of a body whose aptitudes are thus multiplied, and which by this means alone succeeds in establishing an intimate kinship with distant worlds. Instead of reducing sensibility, the space of continuity opened up by the machine enables an aesthetic and synesthetic renewal" (Artaud, 2023, p. 244). Augmented Man is not necessarily at the service of the machine and at the expense of nature.

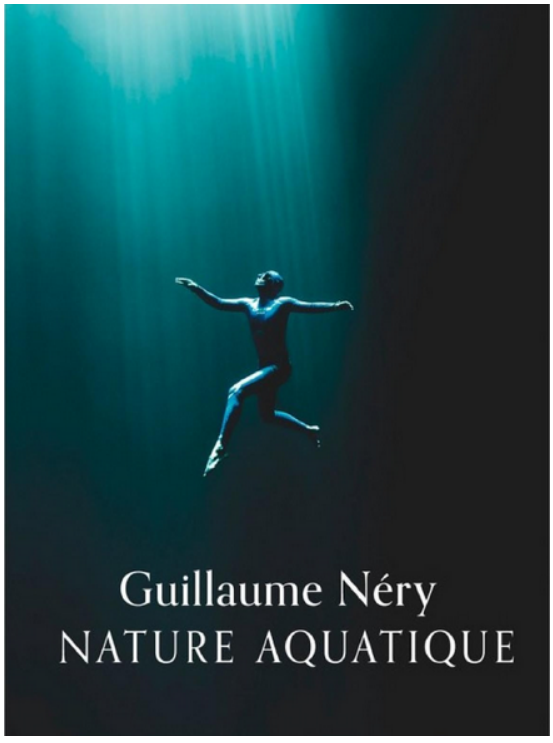

Figure 4. Nature aquatique book cover. Source: Néry, 2022.

The aquatic environment, through the radical upheaval of the senses and the intense emotion it conveys, directly questions our relationship to the world and to living beings (Le Dû-Blayo, 2011). It resonates with the rehabilitation of sensitivity that has been developing in recent years, including – and notably – among scientists for whom what is sensitive is becoming not only an object of study, but even more so a means, an attitude to a world no longer restricted by the shackles of Cartesianism (Tassin, 2020; Corbin 2018). "The idea that the scientist can not only feel empathy for their object of study, but be sensorially and subjectively involved in the experimental process is making a strong comeback in the scientific literature of recent years. [...] She (Vinciane Despret) overturns the idea that the scientific approach and the quality of experimentation depend on the observer's ability to stand back, to reduce as far as possible the subjective elements likely to interfere with observations" (Artaud, 2023, p. 198).

Another world is being unveiled, an *immense world* (Yong, 2022) where the breadth of perception of wildlife opens up an infinite number of unexplored horizons. The diversity of living beings' sensory capacities, and the complexity of their exchanges and interrelationships, awaken us not only to our physical, intellectual and psychological limits, but also and above all to the scale of our impact on the living world. "The 'Atlantic' worldview, which posits the existence of a *Wilderness* – of a nature whose destruction is necessary and at the same time feared, whose conquest is desired and at the same time regretted – remains caught in a paradox that some have characterised as a form of 'imperialist nostalgia'" (Artaud, 2023, p. 222).

This world we are discovering is also a world that is slipping away beneath our feet. The environmental crisis is no longer just a distant reality in time and space, a news item disseminated by the media. It is tangible on a daily basis, and causes confused and mostly negative feelings, a dismay that Albrecht has described as solastalgia: "I therefore define 'solastalgia' as the pain or distress caused by a continuous absence of consolation and by the feeling of desolation provoked by the current state of one's immediate environment and territory. It is the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, felt as an assault on our sense of belonging to a place" (Albrecht, 2019, p. 76). Thus, emotional connections to our environment lead us to question our philosophical connections to nature (Ives, 2018), particularly via wet ontologies (Steinberg, 2015). The critique of the capitalocene, but also research on resilience or the proposals of Symbiocene (Albrecht, 2019) open up perspectives and attempts to build new relationships to the world and in particular to the living. In this quest for a better world, the underwater universe opens up an imagination that contains a revolt, a desire for freedom, a rejection of the continental world and the possibility of a different relationship to living creatures.

Ariel, listen to me
Humans are a mess
Life under the sea is much better than the life they have up there on earth [...].
Under the ocean, under the ocean
Doudou, it's much better, everyone's happy under the ocean
Up there, they work all day
Slaves and prisoners
While we dive like sponges under the ocean
(The little Mermaid, 1989).

5. Conclusions

Deep-sea exploration, one of the great adventures of the 20th century, has substantially altered not only our knowledge of the world, but also our more fundamental relationship with it, in a process of reappraisal that is now coming to the fore at the turn of the 21st century. Initially marked by military and economic ambitions and dominated by the figure of the "underwater hunter", underwater landscape exploration has subsequently been enriched by a variety of experiences and positive emotions, and has gradually seeped into all cultural spheres, in particular the cinema industry. Immersion and contact with the marine element are avidly sought after and increasingly so with the development of water sports. This quest for the

sea says a great deal about our conscious or unconscious quest for meaning, for a new equilibrium with the living, this new horizon... to be explored.
"The exploratory affect must be separated from the colonial mindset, because it exists everywhere among humans, and beyond, and before them: it is part of our animal ancestry. [...] This affect is there, it seems, in each and every one of us, and is a very powerful force for actively reconfiguring our relationship with living things and making the world a more habitable place for humans and non-humans alike. [...] The challenge is to de-bellicose, de-phallocraticise, de-exoticise and democratise exploratory affect, because it deserves to be saved. [...] All exploration becomes diplomatic: it reveals unexpected alliances *between* living beings and certain human uses of the Earth, *against* other uses. Most often against extractivist uses, and all those that weaken the maintenance of the woven fabric, all those that participate in the process of 'cheapening' living tissue" (Morizot, 2023, p. 84).

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