

Cinema Cnidaria, or Marine Movies in an Age of Mass Extinction

Jon Crylen

Writing about the BBC's ocean documentary series *The Blue Planet* (2001), Sean Cubitt identifies a key attraction of water's contingency vis-à-vis film and video recording: "We consider recordings to be records of the past, but the experience of watching water is of a now that extends indefinitely. The precise configuration of light in the frames that pass by is irreplaceable, but another, infinitely or infinitesimally different, will always supersede it, so that its timelessness is not that of the philosophical absolute but of an endlessly differentiating repetition."¹ In the context of climate change and ocean acidification, there is a cruel irony in Cubitt's assessment. The apparent timelessness of the ocean's surface conceals the drastic, catastrophic changes unfolding underwater and in the water's composition. Coral reefs are dying, fish stocks are plummeting, and the seas' temperatures, pH levels, and currents are all changing because of more than two centuries of industrial activity on the earth's surface. To quote the narrator of the Netflix documentary *Mission Blue* (dir. Robert Nixon and Fisher Stevens, US, 2014): "The ocean could be empty and it would still look the same . . . as the ocean is dying, the surface looks the same, the waves look the same." The hypnotic experience of Cubitt's "endlessly differentiating repetition" of light on water stands at odds with the ongoing and perhaps irreversible destruction of marine ecologies.

When we watch movies or videos of the ocean—particularly those from decades past—we would do well not to linger on the sea’s apparent timelessness or to imagine that it extends to the life-forms below the surface. Rather, we ought to be mindful of the sea’s evanescence: to regard these images as records not of an infinite now but of what the ocean once was, to treat films as a memory bank of the life the marine world once housed and sustained. In this respect, we might think of undersea cinema as a “vast mausoleum for animal being,” grim proof of Akira Lippit’s thesis that in the age of electrical media, animals have receded from the human world and been supplanted by time-based, audiovisual representations of them.² Today, human influence registers virtually everywhere on the planet, and countless species have quietly gone extinct as a result of the ecological disruptions this influence has wrought. Technology’s ever-extending reach has not only coincided with other species’ disappearance but also helped bring it about, albeit in the sort of slow-burn fashion that does not lend itself to visual spectacle and therefore goes unnoticed. This is precisely the problem for media and the visual arts—what Rob Nixon calls the “slow violence” of environmental catastrophe.³

If movies of the sea can become the ocean’s amber, preserving, for a time, life-forms that have vanished or are vanishing, then likewise, films and videos of the animals that will likely endure the catastrophes the ocean is undergoing can help us to better envisage the ocean’s future. Which creatures will survive? One distinct possibility: jellyfish, animals that belong primarily to the phylum Cnidaria. Fittingly for the cinema, jellies are arguably the definitive visual index of an ocean in its death throes, standing in for a whole range of crises from which their sheer numbers benefit. As biologist Lisa-ann Gershwin warns, “Major global ecological changes are occurring in our oceans today—and jellyfish blooms are one of the few things they have in common as an outcome. Indeed, jellyfish blooms are visual evidence of failing ecosystems, and, in many cases, the drivers of further decline.”⁴ As the ocean acidifies, the climate changes, pollution increases, and fish stocks get depleted, jellyfish populations explode. They swarm in coastal waters and the open sea. They can thrive in temperatures hostile to most other forms of life. They have been around for nearly six hundred million years, and some thirty thousand species populate the oceans. One species, *Turritopsis dohrnii*, is even biologically immortal, able to revert from a mature medusa to a polyp state through a process known as transdifferentiation—the only animal on earth that can do so. The boundary lines of jellies’ existence, in short, are far wider than those of most other life-forms. “As the seas become distressed,”

Gershwin writes, “the jellyfish are there, like an eagle to an injured lamb or golden staph to a postoperative patient—more than just symptoms of weakness, more like the angel of death.”⁵

Whether sensationalist television specials, fiction films, or scientifically curious documentaries, contemporary film and media texts featuring jellies can help us envision what both marine movies and the ocean itself might become in the coming decades—that is, jellyfish dominant. On a visual register, they allow us to imagine how the seas might look should such “low” life-forms as faceless, brainless, bloodless, and often sightless jellyfish inherit the earth from “higher” forms driven to the brink of extinction: whales, sharks, dolphins, sea lions, and possibly humans. Discursively, they also suggest ways we might come to talk about the ocean and its inhabitants, as they provide a framework of conventions for representing jellies from which future films and videos—should people continue making them as climate change accelerates—will continue or depart.

For the remainder of this essay, I discuss three broad ways contemporary narrative films and documentaries have represented jellies at sea: as swarming threats, deadly beauties, and heterogeneous beings that exist independently of humans. Conceived of as threats, jellies are rendered as monstrous masses of gooey invaders. But in depicting jellies’ independent existence, filmmakers emphasize the diversity and splendor of their forms while showing relative indifference to the dangers they pose to the terrestrial sphere. Because few humanities scholars have made jellies objects of critical consideration and none have concentrated on their moving image representations,⁶ I mean to cast a wide net with these categories in hopes that they can encompass a broad range of examples across filmmaking modes, styles, genres, formats, platforms, and nations of origin.⁷ Ultimately, however, what follows has the more modest aim to provide a beginning framework for conceiving of what, in a cinematic context, an ocean overrun by jellies might look like.

Tentacular Threats

Probably the most familiar way that recent films—TV documentaries in particular—have depicted jellies is as a deadly marine plague. Bearing titles like *Killer Jellyfish* (dir. Richard Fitzpatrick, Australia, 2005) and *Monster Jellyfish* (dir. Jesse Stern, Singapore, 2010), such scaremongering films cast jellies in the familiar role of sea monster, a role once reserved primarily for giant squids and great white sharks. Such films posit jellyfish proliferation as

a threat to human life, commercial interests, and even national security; they are relatively unconcerned with what jelly blooms mean for other marine animals or ocean ecologies. Thus, they repeat familiar stories about the jellied hordes gumming up coastal power plants and aircraft carriers, clogging trawl nets, and of course terrorizing beachgoers, thereby implicitly jeopardizing military might, technological achievement, and the fishing and tourism industries. Deeply anthropocentric, texts in this mode express alarm at an ocean that defies a longstanding image of it as a stable, controllable resource.⁸

Exemplary in these regards is the 3net documentary *Attack of the Giant Jellyfish* (dir. Carsten Oblaender, US, 2011).⁹ This hour-long special has precious little to say about the titular enormities and instead concerns itself primarily with box jellies and Irukandjis, the two species most dangerous to humans. In keeping with its jelly-phobic emphasis on the venomous, the film consistently presents the animals as gooey, coastal invaders from beyond—“an army of bloodless, boneless phantoms of the deep.” On the soundtrack, aggressive narration and a relentless action movie score underline this sense of threat. The visuals, meanwhile, are panoptic and heavily mediated, often relying on satellite imagery and drone cam effects, as if to suggest that only a full-scale military response can quell the pulsing hordes (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Militarized vision in *Attack of the Giant Jellyfish* (dir. Carsten Oblaender, US, 2011).

Apart from a couple of informative sequences about research being done on box jellies' perception and cognition, all that offsets the relentless insistence on jelly takeover are the film's closing thoughts on how humans might use them: for food and for pharmaceutical research. Though presented as evidence of adaptability in the face of civilizational threat, the passage only compounds the anthropocentrism on display, demonstrating no interest in jellies beyond their immediate use to human bodies and economies. In this regard, the American and more broadly global capitalist civilization the jellyfish invasion has imperiled can reassert its might, subduing the gelatinous menace and reaffirming its supremacy over a rapidly changing sea.

Deadly Beauties

A second type of representation balances a sense of these animals' danger with their aesthetic splendor, reflecting a broader, bivalent cultural response: both alluring and deadly, jellies can stun by sight as well as with their venomous stinging cells. In these examples, which most frequently occur in narrative cinema, objective documentation is not the point: jellies are generic, not identified by species (for example, the difference between a sea wasp and a sea nettle is treated as moot), and the oscillation between violence and beauty corresponds to the relative proximity or distance of the observer.¹⁰ Crucially, in these examples jellies' danger and beauty presume a human subject, one who can appreciate them aesthetically and whose body their venom can harm.

Consider the sci-fi thriller *Sphere* (dir. Barry Levinson, US, 1998), adapted from Michael Crichton's novel of the same name. In this film, a crack team of scientists and mathematicians investigate an undersea alien spacecraft containing a giant reflective sphere that turns out to be a conscious being. Moreover, those who enter the sphere find that it wills their deepest fears into reality, and the results are typically scenes of deep-sea horror. In the film's jellyfish sequence, a diver played by Queen Latifah, on a supply run from the crew's deep-sea habitat to the minisub stationed outside, is encircled by jellies that mysteriously proliferate at unusual depth and spontaneously turn aggressive, quickly and fantastically killing her (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Jellies bloom around Queen Latifah in *Sphere* (dir. Barry Levinson, US, 1998).

Here, the jellies' dual nature is emblemized by Queen Latifah's dichotomous reaction to the creatures: first, wonder at their beauty as they float, ghost-like, around her (she twice describes the scene as "beautiful"), then alarm and finally mortal terror as they swarm her and sting her to death through her suit, somehow even slipping into it and sticking to her flesh. Though the scene is brief and the attack itself rather ludicrous—as when a jelly charges her faceplate—it nonetheless conveys something of jellies' phantom qualities. Not only are they seemingly lifelessly adrift and apparitional in their translucence, but, like figments of the imagination, they also proliferate out of nowhere. After the attack, they just as quickly vanish, traceless, as if they were never there. Indeed, it transpires that the jellies were in fact figments of the imagination. The sphere had materialized the protagonist's (Dustin Hoffman) childhood fear; he had been stung badly as a child. Straddling the real and unreal, the living and nonliving, *Sphere's* jellies provide a definitive depiction of these animals as uncanny. Furthermore, in framing the jellies as returns of a repressed human trauma, the film suggests that jellies' fearsomeness has as much to do with human perceptions and experience of them as with their intrinsic properties—that it's as much about us as about them.

Heterogenous Wonders

A third way of representing jellies combines scientific disinterest with aestheticism. Films in this mode, invariably documentary, balance empirical findings about different species' biology and their place in marine ecologies with stunning underwater imagery that abstracts jellies from their environs. For Stacy Alaimo, writing about aestheticized scientific photographs of jellies, a latent ethics can be found in these images. In depicting jellies' translucent,

watery bodies, which in direct encounters can be hard to distinguish from the water itself, as “glittering ‘jewels,’ perfectly set against the sharply contrasting background of black water,” such highly aesthetic photographic renderings evince “care, wonder, and concern.”¹¹ This statement holds equally true for films.

As a concluding example, let us regard Sigurd Tesche’s globetrotting documentary *Vicious Beauties: The Secret World of the Jellyfish* (Germany, n.d.).¹² Running at forty-four minutes, the film plays like a long-form elaboration of the jellyfish sequences in the BBC’s *Blue Planet* and *Planet Earth* (2006) series or the short science videos on institutional YouTube channels such as the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute’s.¹³ The first part of the film’s title echoes the bivalent response to jellies discussed in the previous section. The “secret world” of the second part, however, promises an intimate portrait of jellies, which it provides by exploring the heterogeneity of different jellyfish species as well as their relations to other animals and different marine environments, referring only minimally to beachgoers. Even when the film gets to box jellies, the primary concern is the latest scientific research, not simply the animals’ lethality toward humans. In this respect, the film is exemplary in getting past the stigma that the most infamous species have imparted to jellyfish as a whole. Moreover, Tesche’s film consistently presents the jellies with a measure of aesthetic appreciation. Throughout, a celestial score accompanies images of jellies, emphasizing both their alien strangeness and their fragility, and as in Alaimo’s photographic examples, the jellies are often filmed in isolation, filling the frame against a dark backdrop (fig. 3). The narration, too, is consistently evocative: comb jellies are “neon advertising signs of the ocean”; upside-down jellies are “like gelatinous cauliflower”; a sea turtle feasts on a “marine Jell-O pudding”; and in a montage of jellies at the end of the film, the narrator cites a Tiffany jeweler who described them as “the elves of the ocean.” Overall, *Vicious Beauties* invites viewers to regard jellies with a mix of curiosity and enchantment, even to appreciate them on something like their own terms.

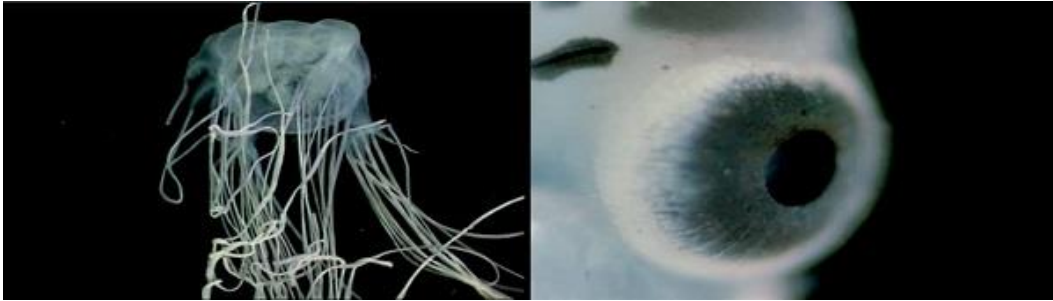


Figure 3. A box jelly—and a magnified box jelly eye—in *Vicious Beauties: The Secret World of the Jellyfish* (Sigurd Tesche, Germany, n.d.).

Here, the second part of the film's title is crucial. It not only promises to cast light on relatively unknown aspects of jellies' objective existence but also (even though neither Tesche's nor any other film I know of goes this far) encourages speculation about these animals' inner lives, should they possess such things—a radical exercise in trans-species empathy. The philosopher Thomas Nagel famously asked, "What is it like to be a bat?"—a question that has inspired a wide range of inquiry into nonhuman perception, sentience, and cognition.¹⁴ In this spirit, we might inquire: What is it like to be brainless, spineless, and sightless jellyfish, drifting and pulsing with the currents?¹⁵ What kind of alternative relationships to the dying world around us might such an attunement to jellyfish being open up—and what awareness of alternative paths and alternative futures? Should industrialism drive the majority of creatures we know to extinction and leave jellies to flourish in their wake, different species of jellies may become as distinct in the public imagination as sperm whales, dolphins, puffer fish, sea snakes, and nurse sharks are to us today. In such a world, jellyfish being may come to seem as multifarious as the whole of life—a microcosm of the diversity of earthly life that once was and that, in a future without civilization as we know it to snuff it out, may yet replenish.

Notes

- 1 Sean Cubitt, *EcoMedia* (New York: Rodopi, 2005), 49.
- 2 Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 187.
- 3 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2–22.
- 4 Lisa-ann Gershwin, *Stung! On Jellyfish Blooms and the Future of the Ocean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 25.

- 5 Gershwin, *Stung!*, 2.
- 6 The two key articles on jellyfish (neither of which is about cinema) are Stacy Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science, Jellyfish Aesthetics: Posthuman Reconfigurations of the Sensible," in *Thinking with Water*, ed. Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 139–64; and Eva Hayward, "Sensational Jellyfish: Aquarium Affects and the Matter of Immersion," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2012): 161–96. To my knowledge, the lengthiest discussion of a jelly film—a background DVD titled *Jellyfish: Healing Kurage* (2006), which the author regards as a spur to drifting thoughts—appears in Paul Roquet, *Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of Self* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 1–3.
- 7 For my purposes, examples are necessarily limited. Notable omissions include *Bright Future* (dir. Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Japan, 2002), whose protagonist acclimates a venomous ocean jelly to freshwater and releases it into Tokyo's waterways, where it reproduces and swarms; and the numerous Werner Herzog films that feature jellies, among them *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (Germany/UK/France, 1997), *Invincible* (UK/Germany/Ireland/US, 2001), the undersea diptych *The Wild Blue Yonder* (Germany/France/Austria/UK, 2005) and *Encounters at the End of the World* (US, 2007), and *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* (US, 2009), which deserve an article of their own. Arguably the classic early example of jellyfish cinema, Geneviève Hamon and Jean Painlevé's short *Comment naissent les méduses* (France, 1960), also undiscussed here, is addressed in Anna Gibbs, "Mimesis as a Mode of Knowing," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 20, no. 3 (2015): 45–54.
- 8 As marine biologist and conservationist Sylvia Earle writes, "The idea that the ocean would hold steady, no matter what we took out of it—or put into it—dominated attitudes and policies globally in the middle of the 20th century. . . . The vision of a limitless ocean mesmerized policymakers, encouraging practices that have accelerated the depletion of marine wildlife and minerals; destroyed irreplaceable ocean species and ecosystems; and simultaneously caused the ocean to be regarded as the ultimate Dumpster." Sylvia A. Earle, *The World Is Blue: How Our Fate and the Ocean's Are One* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2009), 24–25.
- 9 The film can be viewed here: "National Geographic Attack of the Giant Jellyfish Full Documentary HD," YouTube video, 53:23, 27 June 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVi17LixUek.
- 10 Sometimes this distance is strictly the film spectator's, as in narrative films where characters find themselves surrounded by jellies and are more concerned with extricating themselves from danger than with visual pleasure. Take, for example, the electric jellyfish bloom in *Finding Nemo* (dir. Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich, US, 2003), which Marlin and Dory (not humans but anthropomorphic fish) navigate by bouncing off their bells to avoid the stingers; and the bloom into which Blake Lively's character swims, getting stung, while fleeing a great white shark in *The Shallows* (dir. Jaume Collet-Serra, US, 2016). In both cases, the jellies are brightly colored and luminous, but the characters neither comment on nor appear to notice this splendor.
- 11 Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science, Jellyfish Aesthetics," 141.
- 12 While the film's credits do not list a production date, it is widely available online and appears to have been first uploaded in 2013. See "Vicious Beauties - The Secret World Of The Jellyfish (Full Documentary, HD)," YouTube video, 44:03, uploaded by Free Documentary, 12 October 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSoVus8YNsE.

- 13 See, especially, "There's no such thing as a jellyfish," YouTube video, 5:40, posted by Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute (MBARI), 31 May 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3HzFiQFFQYw.
- 14 Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435–50.
- 15 This is not a novel question. Indeed, Stacy Alaimo asks, "If the attempt to imagine what it is like to be a bat is fraught with difficulties, how much more impossible is it to be a jelly?" As if to answer, Eva Hayward writes of the difficulty in empathizing and identifying across radically different bodies: "Identification relies on extending empathy across similarity to dissimilarity organism, providing the identifying human with the authority of an encounter. As such, the organism can only receive the benefits of empathy if we can identify with it. This might work well for charismatic megafauna—dogs, horses, cats, dolphins—that we can map our bodies onto, but for organisms like jellies or coral or octopuses, the overwhelming bodily differences make identification a politics of erasure rather than empathy." See Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science, Jellyfish Aesthetics," 154; and Hayward, "Sensational Jellyfish," 177.

Jon Crylen is a visiting assistant professor in the University of Iowa's Department of Cinematic Arts. He is completing a book manuscript on the cinematic history of the ocean.