

DEATH AND SEA

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A liquid, flowing freely in any shape yet constant in volume, is somehow the epitome of indifference.

Moreover, a large amount of liquid, in the form of the ocean, has an astonishing capacity to phlegmatically annihilate every human action. All along our coastlines, a battle is waged every day between the sea and the structures we often call "resilient". The sea always wins. Away from the coast, the depths of the ocean remain the ultimate untameable space, where design is unconceivable. There is no harbour, submarine cable, ship or nuclear disaster that the ocean cannot absorb. Monsters swim, fish die, algae proliferate, plastic nanoparticles get into our food chain, but the ocean remains unaffected in its shape. That great chronicler of the oceans, Herman Melville, captured this quality of fixedness when he described the waters as 'undulated into long roods of swells ... like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter's mould.'¹

We would like to relay two stories about the sea's changeless capacity to absorb human death – to become an impassive tombstone for collective amnesia. The places we describe won't look much different from the seaside where you sit to cool down any given summer, unless you know the story that lies behind a set of coordinates.

Bodies of Second World War Sailors in Java Sea "dumped in mass grave"

The remains of second world war sailors who died on British and Dutch warships in the Java sea were secretly dumped in an anonymous mass grave by modern-day metal scavengers as they rifled through wrecks illegally lifted from the sea bed, it has been claimed. In recent years a series of huge wrecks have been all but removed from the waters off

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Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*, 1855.

Indonesia by operators seeking to cash in on the valuable metals on board.

The ships that have been dismantled or vanished included the Royal Navy destroyer HMS *Electra*, on which 119 men perished, HMS *Exeter*, a 175m heavy cruiser on which 54 died, and HMS *Encounter*, which was scuttled to avoid capture by the Japanese. It has now been claimed that those employed by the illegal scavengers to cut up the ships on Indonesian soil had also found skulls, jawbones, feet and hand bones, hips and ribs during their work.

A Ministry of Defence spokesman said: "The British government condemns the unauthorised disturbance of any wreck containing human remains. Under international law naval warships and associated artefacts enjoy protection through sovereign immunity.

International law also provides for protection for war graves. Desecration of wrecks of war and merchant vessels causes distress to loved ones of those lost on board and is against international law. A military wreck should remain undisturbed and those who lost their lives on-board should be allowed to rest in peace."

The wrecks are regarded as treasure troves by the salvagers and it is thought that up to 40 second world war-era vessels in the Java sea have already been partially or completely destroyed. Even poor-quality steel can bring in about £1m (\$1.3m) a ship... Other metals valued from the wrecks include copper cables and phosphor bronze propellers.

Daniel Boffey, *The Guardian*, 22 January 2018

Argentine Tells of Dumping "Dirty War" Captives into Sea

Many of the victims were so weak from torture and detention that they had to be helped aboard the plane. Once in flight, they were injected with a sedative by an Argentine Navy doctor before two officers stripped them and shoved them to their deaths.

Now, one of those officers has acknowledged that he pushed 30 prisoners out of planes flying over the Atlantic Ocean during the right-wing military government's violent crackdown in the 1970s.

In his account Mr Scilingo said that he took part in two of the "death flights" in 1977 and that most other officers at the Navy School of Mechanics in Buenos Aires, where he served, were also involved in such flights. He estimated that the navy conducted the flights every Wednesday for two years, 1977 and 1978, and that 1,500 to 2,000 people were killed. He said that after his first flight, in which he slipped and almost fell through the portal from which he was throwing bodies, he became so distraught that he confessed his actions to a military priest, who absolved him, saying the killings "had to be done to separate the wheat from the chaff".

He went on: "When we finished dumping the bodies, we closed the door to the plane, it was quiet, and all that was left was the clothing which was taken back and thrown away. I went home that night and had two glasses of whiskey and went to sleep."

Many Argentines, especially those whose relatives or friends were not killed or tortured during the dictatorship, say it is futile to continue to nurture old hostilities from the dirty war.

Calvin Sims, *The New York Times*, 13 March 1995

At first sight the ocean is a seemingly flat and isotropic landscape. Yet the more we look at it, the more it gains in depth and movement. Unable as we are to draw – and sometimes even to conceive – a fourth dimension, when we contemplate the ocean's infinite mass we experience a perceptible manifestation of a four-dimensional object.

Simultaneously tangible and intangible, accessible and unlimited, the ocean is in tension between reality and utopia. In this sense, it has the quality of a Foucauldian heterotopia:

Heterotopias have, in relation to the rest of space, a function that takes place between two opposite poles. On the one hand they perform the task of creating a space of illusion that reveals how all of real space is more illusory, all the locations within which life is fragmented. On the other, they have the function of forming another space, another real space, as perfect, meticulous and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill-conceived and in a sketchy state.²

The ocean does not belong to the architect's field of operation, since its boundaries cannot be determined, nor its shape or function modified. And yet it is a transcultural burial monument, immutably and indeterminately used to remember and to hide, consistent with its dual nature.

A formless and anti-sculptural space made of symbolic and physical meanings, the ocean is the most extreme burial monument for human contemplation. Once you consider the formless sea as a mega-monument or as the anti-monument *par excellence*, you will no longer believe in the power of forms to commemorate death.

2 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, October 1984, trans. Jay Miskowiec.