

REIMAGINING DEATH IN AN ALL-TOO-HUMAN WORLD: A PEDAGOGICAL EXPLORATION OF PINAR YOLDAS'S ECOSYSTEM OF EXCESS

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a pedagogical response to Pinar Yoldas' Ecosystem of Excess, a speculative marine ecosystem of creatures that have evolved to survive the human-induced proliferation of plastic. In questioning our relationship to death in an era of ecological devastation due to excessive consumption, it proposes a pedagogy of ambivalence to explore what Ecosystem of Excess can teach us about our complicated relations with death. The article then develops three articulations of death—death beyond finality, silent death, and relational death—that are generative for attending to the multi-faceted ways ambivalence manifests itself in the context of more-than-human death.

Introduction

How might we form pedagogies for thinking with ecological devastation, ones that scrutinize the capitalist drive for endless consumption and acknowledge the reality of mass death that this drive perpetuates. Confronting this challenging question is a core concern of my doctoral research, in which I explore the educational value of death through contemporary arts practices (as pedagogical gestures¹) and how it can orient our educational responsibilities and practices to engage with the difficult reality of death and extinction. Pinar Yoldas's *Ecosystem of Excess (EoE)* (2014) helps us through this complex issue in a valuable way. A pressing concern of this research, following Queer Death Studies scholars (see, Radomska, Mehrabi & Lykke, 2019) is to develop expansive and critical articulations of death that better attend to the complexities of human/nonhuman ecologies within catastrophic processes of loss. Death narratives passed through education are significant for developing existing sensibilities and a sense of "response-ability"² towards unjust deaths, which point to the unavoidable implication we share (and abjure) in our participation in a globalizing capitalist culture responsible for serious exacerbations of multispecies extinction.

In this article, I explore the potential learnings and responses that *EoE* stimulates in relation to our ambivalent relationship with death, specifically in the context of sea life destruction due to intense plastic pollution. Drawing from and adding to a body of research that engages with this work (e.g., Baykan, 2020; de Araújo, 2019; Rogowska-Stangret, 2017, 2020; and Yoldas's own writings on the exhibition), I wish to show how the site of the exhibition space, replete with ambiguities, tensions, awe, and wonders—an ecosystem thriving, it seems, after human extinction and the extinction of most of the animal species that exist presently with us—opens up a space of reflection on death and mass mortality, both human and more-than-human. To do so, I consider the ambivalent pedagogy of *EoE* activating the imagination by offering an original framework to (re)think death, life, and ecology and learn from it in order to think about present ways of living in the Anthropocene.

The essay explores three articulations of death developed during my engagement with the artwork, which I have termed as *death beyond finality*, *silent death*, and *relational death*. These articulations raise different kinds of educational orientations: *death beyond finality* invites us to think about the future of new ways of being together; *silent death*

acts as a powerful reminder of anthropocentric nonchalance when we treat death as unremarkable; and *relational death* evokes an ethical response to another, to a time, to a space. This structure offers a framework for the discussion and *EoE*'s pedagogic potential. Through the lens of a pedagogy of ambivalence, I question aspects of the aesthetics, the temporal, and the "queering of death" (de Araújo, 2019) that *EoE* invites its viewers to confront. Such a pedagogy is understood here as a space that creates the conditions for holding tension between two opposing affective states, the affirmative and the negative. Indeed, my interest lies in what stands between these two poles, acknowledging that what the experience does is give one impression that ricochets between what one might categorize as apocalyptic and fascination. This essay proceeds as follows: I first describe the exhibition of *EoE*, followed by what I have called *death beyond finality*, and explore the temporal dimension within which the work speculates before turning to *silent death* and *relational death*. From a pedagogical perspective, these three articulations expose opportunities for people to attend to the multifaceted ways in which ambivalence manifests itself in a more-than-human reality far from oceanic crime scenes.

1. Ecosystem of Excess: context and description

EoE is artist Pinar Yoldas's project that begins in the North Pacific Gyre (also called Great Pacific Garbage Patch): an extreme human-generated environment of puzzling vastness, covering a surface area estimated at 1.6 million square kilometers, soaked in approximately 80,000 tons of microscopic plastics and other toxic debris. The term "plastic soup" that Charles Moore, the oceanographer who first discovered the site in 1985, employed to designate this plastic vortex intentionally echoes the primordial soup theory hypothesizing that life on Earth began four billion years ago, where inorganic matter transformed into organic molecules. Today, while extreme pollution spawned by the overproduction and consumption of plastic threatens the whole of biological life of the sea and those who rely on it, the plastic vortex has become the home of emerging and proliferating microorganisms, such as unicellular algae and bacteria that has led scientists to rename it the "plastisphere." One central question frames *EoE*: "If life started today in our plastic debris filled oceans, what kinds of life forms would emerge out of this contemporary

primordial ooze?” (Yoldas, 2014). Inspired by a range of contemporary marine biology research, Yoldas’s speculative fiction imagines the evolution of new animal life adapting, feeding on, and merging with accumulated plastic waste. “Starting from excessive anthropocentrism” driving plastic pollution in the Pacific Ocean, she explains, “*An Ecosystem of Excess* reaches anthropo-de-centrism by offering life without humankind” (Yoldas, 2015, p. 359). Therefore, while departing from the notion of this gyre as a human-generated problem, the aesthetic quality and narration of the artwork focus less on the destructive unraveling of the world than on its survival and renewal. As Baykan (2020) notes: “Yoldas approaches anthropogenic problems like plastic pollution in less negative and apocalyptic, and more constructive, and even playful terms” (p. 262). Set in a post-Anthropocene, synthetic, watery milieu, Yoldas presents a series of flamboyant plastic-eater species who have fine-tuned their organs to be able to digest and catalyze plastic. She has exhibited these speculative creatures as though they were in a natural history museum of the future, a collection of newly formed specimens is displayed in cases and float securely in tube-shaped glass containers lit from beneath. Dimmed lights make digestive and reproductive systems and sensory organs’ colorful tissues feel bright and alive. The eerie underwater ambience fills the gallery space as one reads the captions and deciphers the diagrams of these peculiarly elaborate organisms grouped into taxa with each of their specific features and sym-poetic relationships explicated meticulously. By the end of this exhibition, you will have been brought through a provocative glimpse of the future that lurks in the present, which Yoldas has manufactured for her viewers as though she had traveled to that time and brought back its archival specimens.

2. Death beyond finality

2.1 Challenging apocalyptic narratives of extinction

EoE teaches the lesson of death in a different way than artworks emphasizing the ruins of planetary destructions. The installation does not necessarily constitute a space for mourning. Rather, it is a provocation to imagine. In particular, what provokes this call to imagination is the possibility for marine life decidedly persevering in spite of human short-sighted and careless attitude toward plastic waste. This sophisticated imagining of symbiosis and coexistence between organic/nonorganic matter disturbs this dualism and offers the potential to

imagine posthuman futures interspersed with unfathomable mysteries rather than obsessing over fixed endings calling forth anxiety and grief.

On offer in mainstream culture and discourse are representations of the Anthropocene, often conflated with the sixth great mass extinction, fraught with sacrificial and life-denying imaginaries (or, alternatively, caught within nostalgic reiterations of past pristine nature), which, as cultural theorist Ursula K. Heise (2016) shows, shapes people’s engagement with extinction, and the future on Earth, favoring simplistic and self-defeating illusions. The flipside of doomed worlds, in which only the human species and other (un)lucky few persist, *EoE* sets out to create one with a profusion of nonhuman others presumably entirely relieved from human presence. The work intends to dispossess us from common tropes invoking the future as either a techno-utopia or a dystopian tale of a degraded and unbreathable planet by introducing an aesthetically constructed futuristic biome centering other-than-human species, in which the human is removed from representation through its pointed absence. Implied in the work is thus a future presented to us that we will never know as humans. In other words, we, the audience, are guided to enter into an experience that aims to disconnect us from the fantasy of a future depending on us. This reading is derived from de Araújo’s (2019) brilliant paper “Life Without Humankind – queer death/life, plastic pollution, and extinction in *An Ecosystem of Excess*”, where he proposes that *EoE*, through its play with temporality, reframes “normative rendering of human extinction as the marker for the end of the world, suggesting a future ecosystem “without the human” (p. 51).

From this analysis, *EoE*’s aesthetic-conceptual gesture incites us to consider an alternative to the overarching problem of anthropocentrism (a contested issue underpinning Yoldas’s project) that grants humans entitlements and a privileged position on this Earth. This matters in educational terms, following Gert Biesta (2014), since envisioning such a world involves a surrender of sorts, in which the viewer is reminded that the world does not have the human individual at the center of it. One interesting aspect of such work is that it can shine a light on humanity’s unstable position on the planetary time scale, rendering our lives inconsequential (at least, in the grand scheme of things), all the while inviting contemplation to the transience of existence, our fleeting all-too-human desires and needs causing unfathomable damage, nonetheless. Indeed, ironically, contrasting the obstinate

anthropological desire for immortality—sought through religion, culture, and various bio/technological means (see, Becker, 1973), *EoE* shows us that only our toxic and plastic-mediated legacies have survived and thrived beyond us. The leftovers of human life are these residues and plastic chunks: “The New Immortals” indefinitely subsisting through time and space (Bastian & Van Dooren, 2017, p. 1). A sense of ambiguity permeates the artistic experience, perhaps leading some to question what is valued in the present-now: material growth or a life where ‘more’ is *not* better?

Citing Claire Colebrook, de Araújo (2019) sees *EoE* as a provocation to think “about extinction beyond species fetishism”, highlighting “other modes of existence—that might survive what ‘we’ can only imagine as the end of the world—as the beginning of new worlds” (p. 51). As viewers contemplate an ornate, phantastic more-than-human future created and co-constituted by intelligent lifeforms, *EoE* troubles a view of death as the place of negativity, an entryway into nihility. *Death beyond finality* shifts our focus on continuation and the complex processes of transformation that it entails. Introduced into a new vision of life, moving beyond the fixed opposition of life and death, new ways of living can be imagined: ones that are subject to change and expand, uninhibited by the void of nothingness severing all relations and becomings. In my own reading, *EoE* unloads the pressure of future times they exert on us and entices us to acknowledge our limitedness as human beings. Moreover, as a performative museum-like space, *EoE* does not merely function as a vessel for cultivating a past culture of death or models our present (human) one; instead, as de Araújo (2019) goes on suggesting: “Differently from usual natural history museums, *EoE* does not dedicate itself to immortalising death through constructing a teleological narrative that goes from past to future, displaying the bodies of ancient species. In *EoE*, Yoldas presents the liveliness of surviving organisms, rather than exhibiting the dead humans” (p. 53). Instead of portraying an emotionally charged allegory of nonhuman species death, the artwork encourages much-needed solidarity with the nonhuman focusing on their “survival rather than on human survival”, which according to de Araújo (2019), instantiates an ethical approach to “account for those who are actually the ones who suffer more from the violence of plastic pollution” (p. 52). In its own way, *EoE* is a snapshot of history where what was muted on the place of carnage begins to speak.

Hence, pushing against a narrative of the eco-crisis that forecloses the future, *EoE* seems to impress something different than a mourning or an act of remembrance as a response to irreplaceable and irreparable loss. Indeed, insofar the feeling of loss can only be understood from the vantage point of the one who survives, *EoE* presents a world brimming with creativity, in which the graceful fragility of life transpires from exquisitely crafted glass organs. This can be felt through the exhibit’s set up, which offers visitors the chance to wander among the carefully curated plastic fauna “as if in a natural museum of the future” (de Araújo, 2019, p. 50)—an immersive experience inviting us to look at a possible future concerned with more-than-human others, while we, as a human species, are positioned in the past prevented from handling the glass-protected creatures. Importantly, Yoldas plays with the uncanny, choosing not to imagine figuration from outer space, but recognizable, beautiful shapes: there are drizzling, rainbow-colored reptilian eggs laid in extremely polluted deep-sea floors, colorless nurdle beaches constituted of millions of smooth plastic granules, pantone-colored birds dressed in a Coca-Cola red and Pepsi blue plumage, pastel turtles floating on their inflated balloon-carapace in low pacific waters. These eccentricities are not freakish looking in the sense that we are repelled by them; they are rather curious and joyous to look at, evoking a sense of wonderment – an invitation to contemplate our existence (or demise) as we aesthetically engage with the works on display.

These atypical birds, moist multichromatic eggs, and artificial shores elicit a feeling of reassurance in the view of a kind of ‘new normal’ excluding the human subject: an environment free of brutality, exploitation, and unwanted death, rhythmized by the eco-evolutionary dynamics of life and death. As the visitor witnesses *not* what has been lost but the possibilities of life’s endless flows of becomings, an emerging feeling might arise when one is enthralled with the beauty of the incredulity of species of the future in the present. “This is so cool!” imaginatively echoes against the walls of the exhibition space. This sense of excitement may also result from thinking of a radically different ecosystem that endured drastic lethal changes and adapted to its needs. In this case for instance, Yoldas explains how the Plastic Balloon Turtle “after eating balloons for eons, evolves an elastomer back that can inflate and deflate. As the sea level rise due to climate change, this elastic becomes an advantage helping the turtle rest on it after swimming for very long hours” (Yoldas, 2014, para. 11). Another example is the industrially

made plastic pellets, these millimeter-wide disc-shaped particles known to be “the most common beach contaminant” who have amassed to feed and provide “shelter to plastic loving creatures” (Yoldas, 2014, para. 9). The audience is also presented with a bewildering glossary of hybrid kidneys, digestive systems and sensory tissues penned by Yoldas and translated into scientific taxonomies as if this act of translation was a way to render intelligible the rich meanings of a living environment in which the organic and the synthetic join forces. *Stomaximus*, *P-plastoceptor*, *E-plastoceptor*, *PetroNephros*, *Petrogestative systems* compose this new field of existence comprised of revitalized organs able to detect, filter, and metabolize hard plastics, such as polyethylene and polypropylene (the two types of the most common plastics found in the gyre).

EoE thus unveils a space of flourishing and regenerative culture after the cessation of constant anthropogenic attacks, rather than being a placeholder for lament and melancholia. Skillfully, and affirmatively, the installation disrupts the teleological trends of the Anthropocene discourse that equates the end of the world with the end of humankind (i.e., the apocalyptic projection of total (human) death). This may trigger imaginative connections for the viewer to think and feel about different, post- or ahuman modes of futurity, and which contribute to trouble our human subjective positionalities within such a future.

I wonder, nonetheless, whose *EoE*'s ‘audience’ is, given it is also a “natural museum of the future”. Indeed, the chosen format of the museum—a site of learning and awareness for the living—inescapably points to the conventional iconography of voyeurism permeating these museum spaces. While reviewers of Yoldas’s work celebrate the re-imagining of life, this ambivalence is worth noting. Drawing on my own childhood experience of these kinds of museums, the fictional yet very realistic creatures I observe in *EoE* might also be interpreted as specimens preserved in formalin-filled jars, hence, dead—or perhaps even that have already died again. I can’t avoid the question: Who is the viewer in this exhibition? Who is ultimately surviving? Educationally speaking, pushing *EoE*'s narrative too far also comes with some reservations on my part. Not because I narcissistically cannot deal with the idea of human subjects no more inhabiting the Earth but because of the implications of developing imaginaries of futures without humankind that may lead to “a gaze from above and nowhere”, as Haraway (1988, p. 581–582) calls into attention. A supposedly neutral stance concealing an

underlying motif that denies differentiated responsibilities and vulnerabilities in relation to the ecological crisis. Speculative fiction invites, but in this case, it can also limit.

These questions uncover another set of responses other than an enthusiastic impression of fascination and enchantment: one that interrogates at what cost this futuristic ecosystem exists. I carry the above questions into the next section, in which I first articulate de Araújo (2019) queer reading of plastic to foreground the uncanny relationship between life and death, and the pedagogical ambivalence it further brings forth.

2.2. Plastics as living/dead matter

The theoretical contribution of de Araújo (2019) subverts plastic as a material able to kill, either suffocating its victims or filling their stomachs until starvation, and foregrounds instead its generative nature: “the plastivore diet represents a new type of life that unsettles the previous harmful meaning of consumption and its relation to self-destruction. . . . plastic is not the cause of death, as in current environmental issues, but the source of new modes of life” (p. 54). Plastic is not merely a dull and inert commodity that kills living beings and forbids any future; instead, it is made of vibrant materialities, a “living dead matter that is indebted to the compressed bodies of dead ancient nonhuman beings—the petroleum” (de Araújo, 2019, p. 49). In line with this reading, *EoE* expands an understanding of death, not antagonistic to life, but existing on a continuum of intertwined, collaborative forces—life and death are thus not in “binary opposition but are intra-active, dynamic, and enmeshed with one another.” In this context, “Death is not the end of life. Rather, it is a resurgence of matter that in the context of *EoE* will be used to generate new modes of life” (de Araújo, 2019, p. 52).

In defying one-sided views of anthropocentric toxic heritage, the central lesson of *EoE* is to recognize and accept that what kills today, i.e., plastic, is a generative source of energy yielding a cascade of new lifeforms. *EoE* thus offers its viewers, and remarkably so, a different death narrative that has more to do with generativity than nihilism. As Rogowska-Stangret (2017) suggests, *EoE* exemplifies “how an excess of life, its abundance, is possible through death; how life takes death as its very material; and how death percolates through life” (p. 66). In effect, this perspective

foregrounding vitalism as not oriented towards death *as* final but traversing all living things is where I see the affirmation of the piece. Such conceptualization of death captures the vitality, the flesh and blood nature of the world, involving the constant flux and fluidity between life and death—which does not annihilate the notion of relationality, but gives rise to different forms of relating and becoming.

In continuation to the discussion above, such an articulation of *Death beyond finality* contributes to disrupt “hegemonic understandings of [death, life, and extinction] in which the human experience prevails” (de Araújo, 2019, p. 51). Indeed, in this scenario, human death is not the “punctuative focus of all life” (MacCormack, 2020b, p. 112); rather it belongs to impersonal cycles of life and death extending way past humanity’s timeline, which aligns to Rosi Braidotti’s (2011) vitalist conception of death—“The ultimate subtraction is after all only another phase in a generative process” (p. 333). Hence, this all-encompassing cosmic force occurs in excess of humans, endlessly regenerating, carrying on relentlessly. A view antithetical to the common narrative of death being a one-sided system of entry and exit that questions our established knowledge of temporal progression from birth to death. Implicitly then, *EoE* teaches that, as with any process of dying, discomfort arises, but so too does a knowing that death will bring about new births, and potentially wiser possibilities that allow others to become. From this affirmative, non-anthropocentric perspective, a degree of openness towards death is demanded of us, for us to affirm the continuity of life across generations and the cultivation of multispecies connections. “Embracing death”, as Patricia MacCormack (2020b) puts it, is to accept the mortal conditions that make the planet a livable and exciting place, and a way for learning to open ourselves to the world, in which death continuously dances its dance with life.

Within *EoE*’s speculative aftermath of mass eco-cide, plastic matter indeed persists but transforms into a life-affording substance playing on the side of life’s abundant and humbling excessiveness. *Death beyond finality* thus gestures towards a sense of response-ability for the future, as it invites us to think about another evolutionary stage, birthing new worlds of relations and becomings and gently pushes us to feel/think a world in which we might be a part of, but not at its center. Yet, an interesting doubleness is at work as Yoldas’s whole imagining is still caught in the aesthetic, iconographic trap, making these quirky organisms attractive.

Aesthetically, they look like plastic toys that I would give a child as a present. Somehow, life with plastic is just going to be more fun. Indeed, in actuality, it usually is. So, there is a pedagogical danger here since plastic is now also killing marine life. How to sit on this knife’s edge in a way that makes us not say “it doesn’t matter”? Overextending a generative view of death might betray a disavowal of the horror facing the devastating loss that we sit in as well. If plastic becomes a “happy” figuration, so to speak, educationally, I worry that we are turning our head again from what is actually happening, simultaneously giving way to a strange, cynical optimism that tolerates excessive consumption as an opportunity for evolutionary expansion. To support this concern, I turn to Ramsey Affifi’s illuminating paper, “Anthropocentrism’s fluid binary” (2020), in which he unpacks some limitations of new materialist theories attempting to radically *deanthropocize* the world. Proposing a hypothetical situation, he asks:

Can you imagine some wily nonanthropocentrist defending [...] the Great Pacific Garbage Patch on the grounds that such material is ‘of’ the world as much as anything else? Such an antagonist might claim there is no such thing as anything truly ‘artificial’ (because humans are never isolated causal subjects and are always co-actors in material assemblages), and that the attempt to judge one thing as good and another as bad (say ocean with or without plastic) marks the imposition of humanly derived moral criteria onto the world. We might be asked to ‘go with the flow’ and accept in sublime resignation the power of the self-organising (or disorganising) universe, ceaselessly creating and destroying itself in a massive process we should not (and in any case, cannot) control. (Affifi, 2020, p. 2)

This quote challenges an extreme new materialist position that assumes these plastic things are just serving another life purpose. Affifi’s critique is akin to that of Rogowska-Stangret (2020), who mobilizes the concept of “bare death” to offer a counterpoint to the always productive action of becoming that remains within the norm of life. “The vision of ‘everlasting life’ fades in view of bare death that cannot be swallowed and digested by life dynamics. Instead, it everlastingly haunts life” (p. 423). From within this view, plastic as living/dead assemblage falls outside the order of life for it can refuse to re-enter the cycles of becomings. Inspired by Yoldas’s *EoE*, Rogowska-Stangret (2020) points to this unresolved tension:

“plastic landscapes illustrate the excess of life well, its ‘generative powers’ used to form a plastic eco-system and the condition of bare death that cannot pass, cannot decay, but stays and lives on in an undead form without the hope of full regeneration” (p. 424). Everything can be double-edged—plastic kills and heals. And it creeps on life. The discomfort and defamiliarization *EoE* accomplishes hold space for these productive mixed feelings that the pedagogical gesture enacts.

3. Silent death

Silent death is not about death. Instead, it expresses how we treat death when we do not respond to it. Facing *silent death*, I argue, may be one of the greatest educational (and pedagogical) challenges of our times.

As hinted above, *EoE* exists at a price. Its environment of thriving complex lifeforms could not have been imagined without the current “biological annihilation” which includes species die-off, various massacres, slow extirpations, and population decline (Banerjee, 2018). Indeed, one must ask whether “Annihilation [can] be a positive metamorphic change?” (MacCormack, 2020a, p. 68). As a posthuman (or ahuman) expression of History that transcends human death, *EoE* replies positively and illuminates life’s richness, tenacity, and resiliency (as sketched above). Yet, to whose annihilation does it speak? We again confront a pedagogical ambivalence that requires us to ask: Who is allowed to exist and who is denied an existence? During the exhibition’s opening talk, Yoldas (Aksioma, 2014) highlights human-induced excessive horrors of the present, underscoring *EoE*’s eco-activist dimension and proposes a cluster of terms “pelagic death; a distant death; an invisible death; slow death” to emphasize different types of deaths occurring in silence across oceans. I use the expression *Silent death* as an umbrella term to refer to the said cluster, not merely as a metaphor acknowledging the annihilation of dying marine life that most humans experiencing the gifts of capitalist consumerism are unable to hear, but also as an indication of oceans going literally quieter (Nagelkerken et al., 2016).

In her provocative essay, MacCormack (2020b) argues that: “The anthropocentric ego is a single point of perception of the world for an individual to get through and thrive and the Earth as a series of relations will always come second to individual survival, be it as excessive or as daily struggle.

Anthropocentrism is “based on ‘as long as it is not my death/the death of someone I value, it is not really death’

. . . The Earth is dying but until it affects the individual no one cares” (p. 109). The death of others, following MacCormack, is de-realized in the sense that it does not feel real until the individual subject “I” experiences it. In other words, death does not really count *as* death in its fullest sense if it is neither mine nor yours. Dreading its loss of prerogatives, the “anthropocentric ego” sacrifices trillions of organisms (often unconsciously and involuntarily) to serve, sustain and enhance modern consumerist lifestyles—a fear less so associated to grand gestures of power controlling others, than one of being deprived of small pleasures and comforts of day-to-day life, concerning us all³. In *EoE*’s context of marine ecologies, even though we know about cruelty and unrestricted wastage, unless we are impacted by it, unresponsiveness is likely to reign.

What Yoldas is so eloquent at articulating is a vision of that future apocalyptic scenario as being clearly held within the present, which resonates with Parikka’s (2018) intimation: “The future might as well be the now in its uncertain existence, a fact that is underscored by the literal nonexistence of a future for specific forms of life, including humans” (p. 29). Yoldas thus offers a learning experience of the anthropocentric ‘I’: a terrifying call resounds as the audience members are shown infamous photographs by art activist Chris Jordan (2009–current) of decaying carcasses of seabirds, their interiors filled with bottle caps and other plastic detritus. Confronted with the sight of these forever mutated animals, a sense of horror unfurls, revealing the limits of viewing death as a creative or productive process. Silence increases the complicatedness of our relationship with death, which is not only distant but also silent. Indeed, the geographical remoteness of oceanic milieux to places of consumption and leisure debilitates our sense to perceive how our actions participate in ecological devastations (Baykan, 2020) and inevitably aggravates the situation. However, it is the process of turning away from these death places, peoples, and stories that I consider a fundamental educational failure. The culture of indifference and the silencing of diverse cultural mechanisms perpetrated by systems of injustice orient us away from certain deaths deemed unremarkable, thus becoming normalized and ultimately “ungrievable” (Butler, 2004).

We, as *EoE*'s audience members, also face the meaning of complicit silence. If turning away is an indication of complicity, it may be one place where the darkest part of ourselves rests, painfully difficult to face, further raising questions of intergenerational tensions. This leads me to question whether there is indeed educational value in accepting death as final and defeat when it shifts from being a companion of life. Here, the expression "deathful emptiness", coined by Deborah Bird Rose (2011, p. 52), conveys in a powerful way the point of "no return" of extinctions and genocides, creating "death worlds" where the dying as much as the not-yet-born lay beyond saving. While I cannot pretend to have an answer to the above, it is worth interrogating the extent to which we become out of touch with death as we become used to it, and no one takes responsibility for it. This layer of critique highlights the educational necessity to expand our existing sensibilities and response-abilities to these silent and bleak worlds swallowing more-than-human lives and all those considered "less than human", i.e., sexualized, racialized, naturalized others" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 270).

From this perspective, *EoE* might not merely provoke an affirmative response to death but create an ambivalent affective state of grief regarding what has died and that which is dying. Grief might also be accompanied by terror, even shame, exposing what *is* (i.e., our implication in the suffering and death set off throughout the production chain of plastics), and how *this* feels impossible that *we* force animals to ingest our processed, noxious trash. Within the moment of shock, *EoE* appears to be a truly disenchanting experiment. However, from that disillusionment, something new might emerge, which, as I have argued, is set in the pedagogical interplay moving back and forth between the affirmative and the very real, life-destroying scenario of aquatic populations. Yoldas seems to be attending to these injured species and ecosystems, of many resting beyond repair, through the bitterly sweet staging of a healthy and sustainable eco-habitat, and in doing so, turns *EoE* into an instructive space to encounter the story of all-too-human violence and darkness without visually showing the hurt to induce connection. I see this as a significant and truly non-prescriptive pedagogical move for sitting with the realities of "earthshattering disasters that cannot be unmade" (Rose, 2011, p. 18) and enabling modes of response and resistance regarding immediate, often unconscious, and meaningless desires created by corporations solely interested in maximizing profit, while bombarding people with paradoxical messages—Save the planet but keep buying! —of which the youth is the main target.

4. Relational death

This third articulation of *Relational death* reveals our interdependent place within the web of life, leading towards a deeper awareness of life/death dynamics and entanglements to possibly motivate a greater sensibility to care for the dying other as a practice of response-ability.

These imaginary creatures proliferating in plastic debris and chemical ooze underscore how ruinous capitalist ways of living in modern globalizing cultures forced animals to adapt, highlighting the inherent human/nonhuman entanglements and intrinsic relationality that drives the fate of marine species and, more broadly, the fate of the planet. The formative dimension of the artwork is that it creates a wedge into our contemporary imagination. Instead of seeing the surface, we see the unknown depth of and the impact we have on the world. In this sense, *EoE* does not represent the summation of the world and existence but points to the fact that we are an integral part of oceanic and terrestrial ecosystems. *Being in relation to* as opposed to thinking that other creatures are here to serve us. Death, rather than understood as the ultimate individual predicament, is conceptualized through relations, questioning the hegemonic narrative of death of the individual and its pedagogical implication. It is worth insisting that relationality is not a nostalgic nor romanticized ontological ideal; quite the contrary, it involves being implicated and accounts for complexity and our ability to respond.

As discussed above, through the spatial and affective experience of *EoE*, as our minds and somatic experiences are oriented towards a future where mutated species are the proofs of a wounded world that was once all-too-human, we are simultaneously confronted with our shared and deep implication with capitalist modes of sustenance and distraction that enable death to expand and expand. Yet, under an ethics of relationality and kinship, "no death is a mere death" as Rose (2011, p. 42) urges. It is not just some fish dying. Anthropogenic extinctions puncture the fabric of life, rippling across spaces, conditioning the precariousness of the present, and future living lives, human and others, with indefinitely long-term effects. The dying (as the living) thus constitutes parts of ourselves and worlds as we are "interwoven into a system in which we live and die *with* others, live and die *for* others" (Rose, 2011, p. 32). Death is never totally *my own*, as the "anthropocentric ego" believes, but is rather always-already interconnected to and intersecting with others' deaths and lives. From a

relational death perspective, the tearing off kins and attachments dovetails with youth's affective and existential reality regarding a world they inhabit abounding in absences and within which their future orientations—only possible *with* humans and other-than-humans—are compromised. In other words, impersonal deaths (and often silenced) are connected to one's own sense of mortality and of all that will never be known, that which will remain forever missing and interrupted before it could come into being.

As such, death as a site of critical inquiry requires expansive rearticulations beyond traditional conceptions of death as an individual and isolated event lingering at the end of one's horizon, for it constitutes a very partial account of mortality that fails to recognize our shared experience of mutual dependency and fragility. An encounter with representations of death through aesthetic formations, therefore, calls different aspects of the self into relation with one another, which a pedagogy of ambivalence can help highlight and further lead to the emergence of ethical responses regarding the still possible life, knowing that it will die. In the case of *EoE*, while not imposing positive feelings on what is devastating, it summons to imagine our own destruction through the destruction of others. In that, the installation brilliantly communicates a pedagogical ambivalence: an unknown where we question the meaning of the artwork and its implication on our humanity and our relationship to death. I herein strongly agree with Ramsey Affifi & Beth Christie (2019) who argue that “facing the death of ourselves, our loved ones, and the natural world, are linked and linkable in various ways, and that sustainability will not be possible without a pedagogy forging, nurturing, and supporting such linkages” (p. 1153). Exploring these points of interconnection and reflecting on the existential and ethical dimensions of personal death resulting from environmental destruction represent such educative moments, foregrounding our ambivalent relationship with death as it requires to “remov[e] the obstacle of self-centred individualism on the one hand and the barriers of negativity on the other” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 190).

5. Conclusion

Staying with the ambivalence refrains from reducing everything to simplistic binaries— a difficult, and perhaps humbler position, more productive educationally, for facing irreversible and unjust deaths, which are yet not the end of the story. Life's fathomless abundance is made possible by death, but death cannot only be a celebration. Complicating this view and attending to the multi-faceted ways in which it manifests itself—neither entirely affirmative nor apocalyptic-anthropocentric—is educationally crucial as we are passing onto the next generation a deeply damaged world, stubbornly still all-too-human. *EoE* provides a powerful opportunity to sit with these ambivalences: between the excitement of prospering lively species after humankind and the present harrowing reality of biological annihilation. It suggests to us the importance of death as a teacher, a potential for pedagogy within the question of death and our complicit relationship to the more-than-human life, as well as the generative possibilities it induces. Insofar as the end is a necessary condition for the promise of a possible beginning, *EoE* offers a vision of an ending necessary to propel new lifeforms exposing that something else is possible, beyond capitalist domination, beyond all-too-human will and consumeristic desires.

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Endnotes

1 I understand an artwork’s “pedagogical gesture” as its ability to point towards neglected and novel ways of thinking and feeling about death, to disrupt, inspire, and open up new avenues for educationalists, artists, and others, and to invite a response. In this sense, gesture is both a mode of expression and of address.

2 My use of “response-ability” derives from Donna Haraway’s (2016) conceptualisation, i.e., the process of rendering one another able of response towards the precarious conditions of the lives and deaths of others.

3 I align this “us” to Michael Rothberg’s theorization of “the implicated subject”, which refers to a subject position and not an ontological identity. He questions how “We are not ‘perpetrators’ of climate change, but [...] – at least in the Global North – in fact implicated in it through our patterns of consumption that prop up an unsustainable global capitalism (Knittel & Forchieri, 2020, p. 18).