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Ocean Pop: Marine Imaginaries in the Age of Global Polycrisis

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Abstract

In an era of global polycrisis, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and geopolitical disruption, how the ocean is depicted and imagined in popular culture plays a crucial role in shaping the public understanding of ocean-related challenges and societal responses to them. We introduce the concept of *ocean pop*—the portrayal of oceanic spaces, issues, and both human and non-human actors in popular media—as a framework for critically examining these imaginaries. We contextualise the concept by showing how popular culture both reflects and shapes dominant (political) discourses about the ocean, spanning topics from environmental protection to piracy and warfare. The articles of this thematic issue underline their contributions to interdisciplinary, multimedia scholarship within the blue humanities and social sciences. Beyond showcasing insights into popular culture artefacts, we highlight the value of *ocean pop* in addressing empirical challenges and normative questions alike. In doing so, we invite scholars to refine and extend the concept as a framework for understanding and reconfiguring contemporary engagements with the ocean.

Keywords

blue humanities; blue social science; marine imaginaries; marine social science; ocean governance; ocean pop; polycrisis; popular culture

1. Introduction

The ocean has historically been a profound source of fascination, myth, and cultural significance. In the current era of global polycrisis—spanning escalating climate change, biodiversity loss, and disruptions to the liberal international order—marine spaces and their representations in popular culture have gained analytical

urgency. Popular culture artefacts and discourses do not merely register these entangled crises; they actively participate in shaping the public understanding of and policy responses to an ocean in crisis.

Examining how the multiple crises facing the ocean are imagined in popular culture matters. Ocean ecosystems are heavily affected by the interconnected crises of climate emergency, pollution, and biodiversity loss, yet, they are crucial for global climate stability, food security, environmental health, and safe navigation. Turning our attention to marine imaginaries thus opens a critical vantage point on the socio-political ordering of ocean space. Examining how crises are aesthetically framed, emotionally charged, and morally coded in popular culture allows us to trace how these imaginaries shape public perception and influence policy decisions, ultimately informing effective responses to these urgent challenges.

Research on imaginaries and marine spaces spans a multitude of disciplines and thematic areas, underscoring the importance of an interdisciplinary approach. In this thematic issue, we thus bring together a diverse yet complementary range of concepts and disciplines from the blue humanities and social sciences—including literature, media studies, anthropology, and human geography—to enhance our understanding of texts related to ocean spaces, actors, and issues and to analytically grasp the complex relationship between popular culture, public discourse, and policy impacts in the context of the ocean in crisis.

We begin by establishing a shared definition of marine imaginaries before coining the concept of *ocean pop*. We then situate the thematic issue within the broader dynamics of the global polycrisis. Finally, we outline the articles that comprise this thematic issue and identify avenues for further research informed by these contributions.

2. Marine Imaginaries

The term imaginary is defined as “that social domain of seeing, experiencing, thinking, fantasizing, discussing and enacting aspects of the material world” (Neimanis et al., 2015, p. 480). This domain of the social imaginary is shaped through shared discourses and practices, reproducing the values, norms, and beliefs held by a social group (C. B. Anderson et al., 2023, p. 74; Taylor, 2003).

Research on social imaginaries examines their manifestation in a variety of contexts, from imagined communities (B. M. Anderson, 2006) to political (Grant, 2014), spatial (O’Brien, 2025), technoscientific (Marcus, 1995), or future imaginaries (Lewis, 2024), to name a few (see also Strauss, 2006). This variety of imaginaries stresses the importance of context-specific analyses, which may otherwise lose nuance or lack the opportunity to develop detailed analyses if forced to revert to the umbrella category of imaginaries. By focusing on the context in which it is specifically used, researchers can respond to criticism that the idea of the imaginary concepts is too broad or vague and overlaps with other concepts, like ideology (Grant, 2014).

Specifically in the context of the ocean, scholars of ocean imaginaries have invoked the “spatial turn” and call attention to the benefits of distinguishing between land-based and marine imaginaries, which are principally anchored in different, though interacting, materialities (Connery, 1996). Steinberg (2018, p. 215) similarly draws attention to this boundary-blurring and at times defying feature of the ocean as a space of both opening and closure, distinguishing it from other spaces because “the ocean cannot easily be enclosed”

physically or through regulatory mechanisms. To stress this interaction of marine and land-based imaginaries, Siriwardane-de Zoysa (2021, pp. 90–91) employs the concept of “seascapes” to highlight the relational qualities of the marine spaces “as fluid borderlands and as liminal, interactional zones...rife with myriad socio-ecological dynamics that unfold between land, sea and air.”

Bringing together these notions of imaginaries and the spatiality of the ocean, scholars have developed the labels of “oceanic imaginary” or “imaginaries,” referring to “epistemological and ontological constellations that suggest a particular way of visualising, knowing and relating to ocean spaces” (Ntona & Schröder, 2020, p. 245; see also Hereniko, 2001). In this context, the terms “ocean” and “marine” imaginaries are often used synonymously. To provide a clear definition and avoid terminological overlap with our concept of *ocean pop*, we use the term marine imaginaries throughout this thematic issue.

The literature distinguishes between a variety of marine imaginaries. The following overview is by no means exhaustive, but should serve illustrative purposes. One of the most prominent marine imaginaries relates to the idea of the ocean as an ungoverned or uncontrolled space. Historically, the sea has been repeatedly depicted as a place of adventure and lawlessness for pirates (Sanna, 2018), as well as an untameable natural force, endangering the safety of seafarers but also serving as an imaginary of myth and mystery (Colby, 2018; Dake, 1992). In modern times, securitization imaginaries create a narrative in which order at sea is under threat, often with the goal of legitimizing naval countermeasures or projecting naval power (see e.g., Kinacioglu, 2023, on maritime migration; McNeill, 2023, on piracy).

At the same time, colonial imaginaries emphasize the notion of the ocean as a space of conquest and exploitation (DeLoughrey, 2019). The ocean is routinely imagined as an indefinite source of economic growth and wealth, a site of extraction with natural resources only waiting to be untapped for capitalist purposes (Mallin & Barbesgaard, 2020). By contrast, Indigenous perspectives highlight the ocean as a site of cultural significance, identity, and kinship, and emphasize its role in the resistance against Western-dominated imaginaries (Ingersoll, 2016). Environmental imaginaries perceive the oceans to be in need of protection and conservation, as vulnerable marine ecosystems are under increasing pressure from global warming and increased economic activity (Engel et al., 2021; Steinberg et al., 2018). Finally, scientific imaginaries perceive the ocean as a site of future-oriented possibilities, whether that is exploring and exploiting deep and distant oceanic spaces (Ratté, 2019) or developing technological fixes for environmental challenges such as geoengineering.

Overall, marine imaginaries clearly have an impact on how societies interact with oceanic spaces. Popular culture plays a crucial role in this—how the sea is portrayed within popular media eventually shapes public attitudes, behaviours, and policies towards oceanic spaces, issues, and actors. We thus propose the concept of *ocean pop* to analytically grasp marine imaginaries and the popular culture artefacts in which they are created and represented.

3. Ocean Pop

Our concept of *ocean pop* refers to the portrayal of oceanic spaces, issues, and both human and non-human actors within popular media. With the concept, we aim to combine cultural and media studies, which offer rich analyses of popular artefacts, such as movies, television shows, video games, music, and more, with

international relations and political science research, which provides explorations of the broader (geo-)political implications of the marine imaginaries created through and inspiring these artefacts. In doing so, we seek to bridge the disciplinary divide between the blue humanities and social sciences, stressing the importance of adopting a multidisciplinary lens to analyse marine imaginaries. *Ocean pop* thus emphasises the intersection of these representations with ocean politics, exploring how marine imaginaries influence public perception, policy, and the socio-political dynamics related to ocean spaces, actors, and issues.

Critics often discredit popular representations as lacking seriousness or legitimacy (cf. high vs. low art distinction; see Brottman, 2005; see also Baym, 2008). Scholars also stress the idealization of imagined spaces, often constructed in conjunction with popular media, e.g., envisioning pristine natural environments (Steinberg et al., 2018, p. 176). Yet, we can indeed observe many instances in which popular marine imaginaries have initiated real-world impact over time and across a variety of media types. In the 15th and 16th centuries, wall paintings in the Doge's Palace commemorating Venetian naval battles defeating the Ottomans served to reinforce a clear demarcation from Islam vis-à-vis the Venetian Christendom (Connery, 2010, p. 689). In 1851, the novel *Moby-Dick* presented the figure of the whaler as an ocean-based facilitator of exploration and world travel in the 19th century (Long, 2011). Over a century later, Teaiwa (1994) highlighted how the Pacific Ocean's violent colonial and militarized history is overlaid with Western imaginaries of leisure and sexualized beauty, epitomized in the bikini swimsuit named after a nuclear testing site, the Bikini Atoll.

In our contemporary shared memory, the movie *Jaws* (1975) is perhaps the most notable example of a marine popular culture artefact with real-life implications. It affected shark policies for decades (Pepin-Neff, 2019) and continues to fuel the public's fear of sharks to this day, reproduced in what Bolton (2023) labels the sharksplotation genre. *Free Willy* (1993), in turn, led to over 20 million dollars spent on rewilding the movie's animal lead, the orca Keiko (Colby, 2018). With the global rise of the internet, digitally literate populations worldwide can now produce and share oceanic narratives. A recent example of a viral news story that has resulted in a variety of memes is orcas ramming yachts off the Iberian Peninsula from approximately 2020 onwards (Riederer, 2023). It is therefore evident that how we perceive the ocean indeed shapes how we interact with it. Popular culture representations of ocean spaces, actors, and issues navigate the complex boundary between absurdity and seriousness, effectively engaging diverse audiences and thereby shaping discourse and real-world actions on marine matters.

4. Global Polycrisis and Marine Imaginaries

In 2022, Adam Tooze coined the term “polycrisis” to describe current economic and non-economic crises such as Covid-19, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the increasingly urgent climate crisis that interact with each other “so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts” (Tooze, 2022). The buzzword has since gained traction in academic research and is increasingly utilised in anthropology (Henig & Knight, 2023), sustainability (Lawrence et al., 2024; Sogaard Jørgensen et al., 2023), economy (Helleiner, 2024), and international relations studies (Brosig, 2025).

Broadly speaking, a polycrisis can be defined as “a nested set of globally interactive socio-economic, ecological and cultural-institutional crises that defy reduction to a single cause” (Swilling, 2013, p. 98). It is characterised by a temporal simultaneity of crises and by a dense interconnectivity between multiple global

systems. Crises in systems such as the economy, trade, environment, health, and international security do not just add up; they intersect and interact, thus multiplying the degradation of humanity's prospects and the future of the planet (Lawrence et al., 2022, pp. 2–5). Crises can be caused by long-term stresses, like increasing socio-economic inequality, global warming, and demographic change, as well as short-term triggers, such as political uprisings, bankruptcies, or the extinction of a keystone species (Lawrence, 2024, p. 2) that might tip an already stressed system into crisis, eventually creating disruptive effects in other systems and even feedback loops. Because a global polycrisis has no single underlying cause, it requires systemic, transboundary, and multidisciplinary solutions. Yet another characteristic of a systemic crisis is deep uncertainty about the underlying drivers of the crisis and their consequences (Renn et al., 2019), thereby complicating potential mitigation strategies.

The ocean is indeed a site of multiple interconnected fundamental crises. Ocean warming, acidification, pollution, rising sea levels, and mass extinction are all inextricably linked to the climate emergency and fuel one another further (Venegas et al., 2023). This has destructive implications for human food security and the overexploitation of marine resources. It also forces migration and thus promotes maritime insecurity, which is already exacerbated by the naval power projections of global powers. Finally, the current crisis of multilateralism (Börzel & Zürn, 2021), manifesting in the rise of authoritarian regimes and a resurgence of nationalist policies in many countries, means that international institutions are increasingly unable to address these global issues, neither individually nor in their causal complexity.

5. Contributions to the Thematic Issue

In this thematic issue, scholars of a wide range of blue humanities and social sciences build on the notion of *ocean pop* to examine how popular representations depict oceanic spaces, actors, and issues to evoke certain marine imaginaries within the broader framework of the polycrisis, thereby underscoring the relevance of popular culture in facilitating and informing public and policy discourses.

In her analysis of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise and contemporary regimes to counter piracy, Anja Menzel (2026) explores the tension between lawlessness and legality at sea. She demonstrates how, in both fiction and reality, legal frameworks governing piracy constitute marine imaginaries that resonate with and shape our perceptions of legality and morality within marine contexts.

The Polar Sounds project, conducted by Geraint Rhys Whittaker (2026), highlights the potential of creative engagement in enhancing understanding of marine environments. By involving musicians and sound artists to reinterpret acoustic recordings of the Arctic and Antarctic oceans, this project exemplifies how artistic processes can cultivate new auditory imaginaries of oceanic spaces.

Charlotte Gehrke's (2026) examination of popular depictions of marine mammal "celebrities" traces evolving public attitudes toward ocean conservation over the last 70 years. Her analysis shows how anthropomorphic framing can enhance public engagement with conservation messages, fostering emotional connections to ocean ecosystems.

Similarly, Antje Scharenberg (2026) delves into the aesthetic representations of fish in popular culture, showcasing how subsea activists challenge depictions that promote "charismatic," yet extractive perceptions

of fish to foster deeper appreciation for marine habitats. This underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of aesthetic preferences in conservation efforts.

In a different realm, Erdem Lamazhapov (2026) explores how video games depict polar oceans as geopolitical frontiers, influencing global political narratives and player interactions. This highlights the role of digital media in shaping contemporary understandings of oceanic spaces, revealing how entertainment can intersect with geopolitical discourse.

Finally, the critical review of popular ocean documentaries by Steven Mana'oakamai Johnson and Angelo Villagomez (2026) underscores the importance of decolonizing marine narratives. They demonstrate how these films often portray oceanic crises through a colonial lens, privileging Western narratives. By obscuring the structural and historical roots of ocean degradation, Indigenous and frontline communities are being marginalized. The authors' proposed principles for more just and inclusive, decolonial ocean storytelling highlight the necessity of incorporating diverse voices into popular culture artefacts to develop a more equitable and comprehensive understanding of oceanic spaces and the socio-political dynamics that shape them.

Collectively, these studies reflect overarching themes of tension between representation and reality, the influence of narrative techniques on public engagement, the need to decolonize marine narratives, interdisciplinary approaches to understanding oceanic issues, and the significant impact of cultural context on perceptions of the ocean. Together, they underscore the complexities inherent in the representations of ocean spaces, actors, and issues in popular culture, ultimately contributing to the understanding of marine imaginaries in the face of global polycrisis.

6. Outlook

Popular culture both reflects and influences societal understanding of crises, revealing how oceanic realities are imagined, contested, and legitimized. The concept of *ocean pop* holds particular value for empirical analysis of these phenomena, as its deliberately interdisciplinary nature encompasses diverse forms of popular culture and media, thereby challenging the trivialization of popular media in academic analysis. The articles featured in this thematic issue engage with a wide array of popular cultural media, such as video games, blockbuster films, documentaries, and music, yet the concept's scope can and should be broadened to include other texts, like performance art, comics, novels, and digital material.

By focusing on the context of polycrisis, *ocean pop* illustrates the significant role of popular culture during times of multiple crises. With this, normative questions around ocean ownership and the capacity to shape oceanic futures become increasingly salient: Who is represented in marine imaginaries and who is absent? Which power structures are reinforced? Whose visions of justice are promoted? From the perspective of the blue humanities and social sciences, these inquiries involve deconstructing existing relations and challenging assumptions often taken for granted. In uncovering these underlying dynamics, the study of marine imaginaries can improve collective responses to oceanic crises. We therefore encourage further critical engagement with the concept of *ocean pop* and invite others to refine, contest, and further develop this approach as a framework for understanding and reshaping contemporary ocean governance in the age of global polycrisis.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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