“We live like prisoners in a cavern of light. Let us overturn old images: does the search for truth follow the path of shadows? Nothing is more wrong than John’s words ‘light glows in the dark but the shadows had the power to refuse light’. On the contrary, darkness is so weak before the smallest glimmer that as soon as the latter appears, darkness flee. Light always conquers while obscurity always beats a retreat. However, I respect and try to protect the lowly darkness which is less peremptory, less arrogant, less harrassing than invasive brilliant lights. I like shadows, my sister, a fragile beggar who rests my eyes.”

Michel Serres – Eyes. Pg 69

Verena Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor took the time to sift through all 130,000 frames of their 2012 Leviathan documentary – a laborious wade through action, movement and visions of an industrial fishing boat in North America. They isolated images of opaque density, which to them had the quality to be in “the presence of an otherworldly being”. Included here is an excerpt of the 686 images they found to be in that presence: a reduced sequence of a disturbing visual meditation on darkness and the contradictions of its weakness.

Once upon a time, darkness of ignorance opposed true knowledge. Hobbes was afraid of the dark, but law ran into its folds without fear for legal rights follow the expulsion of darkness. While working as counsel for the Dutch East India Tea Company, Hobbes’s contemporary Hugo Grotius wrote a small book called Mare Liberum. According to Grotius the sea was common property because it is ‘not susceptible of occupation’ and its ‘use is destined for all men’. Jurisprudence developed. The sea is common to all humanity, thus it follows everybody was free to travel and trade upon and within it. Free trade, an exchange is based upon the promise of a free commonwealth, married with piracy, military and discovery. The ideology of the sea commenced and Grotius’s words inscribed into the deep. First, ships glided freely to monopolise seas. Now polluted particles penetrate sea crevices. Shadows come like the conscience of forgotten darkness.

At sea, the fragile human eye is isolated. It needs help to navigate darkness. Stars, instruments, horizons and wind assist directions and danger assessment. What about underwater, away
from sun, sky, stars and horizon? Into the place where shadows are light? In these images the relations between light and dark invert and reveal – darkness holds weak light. In this weakness there’s no expulsion. No occupation. Darkness is found. Apparitions are welcomed. The sextant, the horizon, the stars and the mariner’s song all simmer in the background as surface compensations for a darkness that cannot be undermined. That cannot be lost.

The unprotected aqueous, selfish salt of the human eyeball swells and closes after a few minutes. It is empirical: human eyes cannot tolerate a deep, free sea. Go blind. This is legal. Mare clausum is the closed sea, not accessible to other states. Beneath the waves, the human eye finds the exception to mare liberum.

Hello darkness my old friend. Can the human eye go deep into darkness without the help of friends? Into the courage the surface’s cusp asks? Not producing light but responding and clamouring for it? These images are stills taken from GoPro film. Sports cameras attached to multiple bodies work as ocelli with sensitivities that don’t capture form but detect light even in very low quantities. In water, the GoPro favours sensitivity over resolution. The camera not fixed and unable to be still, finds stillness in the slow time of these images.

The choices of the documentary makers deliver honesty of small human vision anchored to an organ, but widened and made resilient with technology. These artists take their instruments into the outskirts of Leviathan’s cadaver, towards darkness the human eye cannot survive, as if it could be measured, as if it could be seen. Revisiting the corpus, daemons and phantoms appear, inscribed into the image like narratives of the always already lost: visuality is what it is not.

The artist eye records where ecocide resides. It draws forth spirits and ghosts to archive the deceased king of our polluted imaginations and dying lands. In these images is a call towards the details of captured temporality – a respite from velocity and noise: a pause in the destruction to be with fragile light and strong darkness. Immortal ocean shadows rise in spite of the obscured, carbon-saturated sun.

The arrogant sea has been defeated: for it never was. It’s always been a weakened sea. It’s too late for light. It’s also too late for irreverence towards the mariners, discovers, traders, fishermen, sailors and sirens. To occupy with light and right are ambitions that dissolve into darkness despite the best efforts of law to make freedom there. In the shallow deep, reverence is rediscovered. There’s no innocent passage. Here we meet complicity with ghosts. Can what is found ever be owned or occupied? Before being found, owned or subjectified, comes dark law: shadow jurisprudence that will not be expelled. It resists in spite of violence, to arrive like a quiet sister. Without decisions, intent, consent or imperative. What is lost and found? Was the fragile sea lost to legal light? Here she remains in residual wail reminders of dark truth, unable to be held by a human fist or narrative. Eyes rest in simmering darkness. Blind dark law is too weak to be resisted: it seeps into silent stills.