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Leviathan and the Experience of Sensory Ethnography

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This article explores the genre of "sensory ethnography" through an investigation of the film Leviathan *(2012, Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel) and the critical discourse that has arisen around the film. It argues that even as the film dynamically explores new aesthetic territory, some of its basic presuppositions about the ability for film to convey experience and to represent the sensory world remain unexamined for the ways in which they are themselves conventional.* [experience, phenomenology, sensory ethnography, thick description]

This essay is as much a response to Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel's film, *Leviathan* (2012), as it is to the discourse that has arisen around it—the reviews, the interviews with the filmmakers, the magazine articles, and public discussion at film festivals and at film studies conferences. These reactions, characterized by an almost uniform enthusiasm and praise for *Leviathan*, say something quite reassuring: one can only agree with Scott MacDonald when he writes that *Leviathan* leaves us not only astonished at the world, but "also continually astonished at what, after more than a century, cinema can still do to us and for us" (MacDonald 2012). It is fantastic to see emerging from our shores a rethinking of documentary form, and one that so provocatively rejects many of the tired conventions of contemporary documentary cinema: those of broadcast journalism, the "character-driven" film, the imperative that documentaries "tell stories," and the need to guarantee a documentary's measurable social impact. As welcome as such a rethinking is, however, it is worth investigating some of the presuppositions and theoretical assertions about experience, spectatorship, and embodiment that mark *Leviathan* and the discourse around it, and to begin to call into question some of the claims about the seemingly immersive experience the film offers as well as its ability to supplant contemporary documentary and ethnography by way of a fuller rendering of the sensory encounter with the profilmic world.

Against the weary dominant forms of contemporary documentary, *Leviathan* and its creators have further developed the now well-known notion of "sensory ethnography,"[1] an aesthetic program that puts into filmic practice Castaing-Taylor's important 1996 essay "Iconophobia," which chastised the discipline of anthropology for its antipathy toward, if not its fear and resentment of, visual anthropology. Among others subjected to withering criticism in that essay was Maurice Bloch, who advocated "discussive, intellectual" films that provide interpretive, textual frames for the visual materials they present, films which by Castaing-Taylor's reading assign "visuality" to a mere ancillary, illustrative function, as opposed to a function that would be "constitutive" of anthropological knowledge (Taylor 1996:66). Such films are the precursors of precisely the type of film that sensory ethnography rejects today. Bloch insisted that "the idea that ethnographic film speaks for itself is wrong," to which Castaing-Taylor retorted: "But what if film doesn't speak at all? What if film not only constitutes *discourse about* the world but also (re)presents *experience of* it? What if film does not *say* but *show*? What if a film does not just *describe* but *depict*? What, then, if it offers not only 'thin descriptions' but also 'thick depictions'?" (Taylor 1996:86; emphasis in original). If anthropology was marked by a dominant iconophobia, I am tempted to say an analogous antagonism could be sensed in Castaing-Taylor's critique, one that has become even more evident and palpable in *Leviathan* and the filmmakers' discourse surrounding it: namely, a visceral distrust of words or discursivity, a *logophobia*. This logophobia appears in Castaing-Taylor (and Paravel's) interviews in terms very

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familiar from "Iconophobia": as a distaste for, variously, propositional knowledge, narrative voiceover, the preresearched and the pretextualized, the false clarity of explanation, and didacticism more generally.

In lieu of this discursivity or discussivity, sensory ethnography offers a cinema of sensuous plenitude and perceptual richness, embodied experience, and visceral immediacy, which, in a number of the films produced under the imprimatur of the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard, includes a near-total eschewal of textual devices, be they in the form of explanatory or expository voiceover, intertitles or other textual framing devices, and in many cases even much comprehensible dialogue from its human subjects. Thickness, in these works, lies indeed not in description, but in voluminous depiction, in the sheer layering and sequencing of at times overwhelming—to many viewers—and almost always astonishing visual and auditory and rhythmic sensory input as the films devote their attention to the "affective and embodied" aspects of "social existence and subjectivity" (SEL). Furthermore, Castaing-Taylor and Paravel (2013a) claim to avoid preliminary research, preferring instead to do their "research with and through the camera," aiming for a "rawness" and newness that an unprepared and immediate encounter might bring and that preliminary research would impede.

It is hard not to read into the rawness of experience that *Leviathan* and its makers aim to convey a return to a kind of claim for the immediacy of experience in cinema, one that is precluded by the linguistic and the textual; words, it seems, are a hindrance to such experience, and in this cinematic realm the prelinguistic or nonlinguistic attains a priority and preeminence once again after the famous "linguistic turn" that marked anthropology as much as literary and critical theory. In its celebration of the bodily and affectively immediate, *Leviathan* is at one with much recent "embodiment" and "affect" theory that has gained currency in academic debates of late. And clearly, *Leviathan*'s reviewers have accepted quite eagerly its claims along these lines, seldom calling into doubt the capacities of *Leviathan* or sensory ethnography more broadly to convey embodied or affective experience.

We would do well, though, to keep in mind a warning about the cinema from the German filmmaker and theorist Alexander Kluge. He draws from a source that, in the context of a discussion of sensory ethnography, might appear unexpected or irrelevant: Immanuel Kant, someone alien to, and the object of critique by, the phenomenological tradition to which Castaing-Taylor and Paravel appeal. Kluge frequently refers to a famous passage in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant declares: "Concepts without content are empty; *intuitions without concepts are blind*. Hence it is as necessary for the mind to make its concepts sensuous (that is, to join to them the object in intuition), as to make its intuitions intelligible (that is, to join to them under concepts)" (Kant 1855[1781]:45; my emphasis).[2] For Kluge, Kant's maxim contains a dialectical imperative for cinema, an insistence that it constantly mediate between the extremes of intuition and concept, between sensory input or experience and mental processing, if it is to remain true to the ambitions of the Enlightenment. If it does not consistently sustain this mediation, it will tarry at one pole or the other of this opposition and for all intents and purposes devolve into one form of ideology or another, a sort of empty conceptualism on the one hand, or a blind empiricism and a sort of cinematic nominalism on the other.[3]

Let me be rather polemically direct: despite *Leviathan*'s sensuous richness and thickness, despite the onslaught and assault of sound and the constant barrage of images, many of which are unexpected and astonishing, glorious, and absurd, the experience that the film offers remains quite *blind*.

But blind to what? What, in this film that makes *visible* so much we have likely never seen before, and in some cases may never wish to see again (I think here of the rays being hacked to pieces like in a scene from *Le Sang des bêtes*), remains *invisible*, invisible due not only to its eschewal of the conceptual, but also as an effect of the very way the film makes things seen? Here, of course, I am alluding to Merleau-Ponty's (1968) famous conceptual pairing, as in the title of his posthumously published masterpiece *The Visible and Invisible*, where he defines the invisible in terms almost eerily appropriate for this film: it is the "lining of the visible," its "inexhaustible depth" (149). So appropriate does this terminology seem, in fact, that one wonders if the best reading of the film's title is not as a reference to the mythic creature living beneath the boat ready to

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swallow the boat (and us) whole, but an allusion to this invisible, this massive, elusive background at once threatening and enlivening, to which the visible owes its very existence. But one should resist a mythical reading and insist instead that the invisible is *not* some mythic creature, despite the biblical reference of the opening title card, which functions not, as some have suggested,[4] as a conceptual-textual enframing, but more as a kind of ornamental "feeling tone," as Theodor Adorno might call it, a tone only reinforced by its Gothic script. The invisible is not, as Merleau-Ponty (1968) insists, some "absolute invisible, which would have nothing to do with the visible. Rather it is the invisible *of* this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being" (151). I will return to this question in due course.

But first, to continue with the Kantian opposition between concept and intuition: it is apparent from the remarkably consistent descriptions of *Leviathan* offered by reviewers, as well as by the directors themselves, that the pole of "intuition" is more than well attended to. Scott MacDonald's comments, in *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn*, which insightfully situates the work of the SEL within the context of the development of American ethnographic film at Harvard, are exemplary: the film's "immersion of its audience within the audio-visual surround . . . feels not only overwhelming, but quite new in the annals of modern theatrical cinema. . . . *Leviathan* swallows *us*—regurgitating us out of the theater at the end of 90 minutes, exhausted and happy to have lived through" the sensory trauma. "Throughout *Leviathan* we are experiencing not only the labor of the fishermen, but the labor of the filmmakers themselves, from *inside* their experience as we feel rocked to and fro" (2013: 335–336; emphasis in original). Castaing-Taylor and Paravel have spoken of the film in similar terms. In one of their many interviews, Castaing-Taylor remarks that "the film exists before interpretation," and that his and Paravel's "purpose was to give people a very potent aesthetic experience, to give them a glimpse into a reality that they haven't had first-hand—a protracted, painful, difficult, visceral, profound embodied experience. . . . Our desire was simply to give an experience of an experience. . . . It's an 87-minute experience of being at sea, both metaphorically and literally" (Castaing-Taylor and Paravel 2013b).

Two entwined aspects of these remarks interest me here. The first is the apparent conviction that cinema is somehow capable of transmitting experience in rather direct fashion, a conviction that seems clearly marked by a classic logic of fetishistic disavowal: the logic that says, "I know very well, but nonetheless," a central feature of contemporary ideology, as Slavoj Zizek has frequently argued. In this case, the generally canny commentators find themselves swept away by the film, and although they know better, they speak and write as if film were able to convey the experience of the profilmic world in unmediated fashion. One is "at sea" in the film, "both metaphorically *and literally*." The "film swallows" and "regurgitates" us. The metaphoricity of language seems forgotten, and the (sometimes quite bad) puns that repeat themselves from review to review, conversation to conversation, seem quite literally intended, as if the film's synesthetic effects were the same as we would undergo if we were on the boat itself: the film chills us, rocks us to and fro, and, in perhaps the most frequently repeated forgotten metaphor of all, it "immerses" us in all sorts of things, from the sea to the film itself, which, in the end, are both one. The term "immersion" is not only the most frequent, but most suspect, as well, because it is not only an entry from the lexicon of the ancient briny deep, but also a central feature and ambition of the most current of media forms, those of digital media, which offer an endless array of immersive entertainment experiences. My point is then not only that a logic of disavowal runs through the commentary about *Leviathan* and its capacity to offer up embodied experience, but also that the very terms whereby that experience is conceived and preconceived—and it is preconceived, no matter how much its makers and celebrants might wish in the tradition of phenomenological criticism to disavow any such preconceptions[5]—are drawn from the realm of widespread contemporary cliché. "Immersion" is already a conventional and tired experience and idea, and paradoxically enough, its ubiquitous spread throughout the lifeworld of our times as a simulacral experience, in a time when experience has been robbed of all depth, is the precondition for us to return to the primal seas and sink into them.

The second aspect of these remarks, which I wish to address, concerns the curious redoubling of the term "experience" in both MacDonald and Castaing-Taylor's comments. To reiterate: MacDonald writes that we experience the labor of the fishermen and the filmmakers themselves "from *inside* their experience." Castaing-Taylor says that *Leviathan* provides an "experience of an experience." At first blush, this redoubling can be read as the trace of phenomenology, a clear inspiration for Castaing-Taylor and Paravel's concern with embodied experience. Recall that in "Iconophobia," Castaing-Taylor admiringly cited Vivian Sobchack's bold claim for cinema: "More than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself

sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience."[6] It is not clear to me what status Castaing-Taylor's reading of Sobchack might have as a form of research; it strikes me though that it has indeed conceptually prepared the ground for his and Paravel's imagination and experience of the production of their film. But that aside, it is difficult not to read this redoubling less as an account of the particulars of the filmic experience, as a form that in Sobchack's vision is uniquely capable of making seen the act of seeing and being seen, than as an unconscious echo of the supremely commodified world we inhabit today. And here one approaches the boundaries of the "invisible" of *Leviathan*. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002:119) once quipped of tourist photographs that they "offered . . . not Italy, but evidence that it exists," a remark that seems almost overly confident in photography's evidentiary powers. Perhaps one should assert today that in cinema experience is not offered, but rather "an experience of an experience."

In any case, the redoubling of the term implies that at least three forms or levels of experience are at play in the film: that of the spectators (the "we" in MacDonald's comment); that of the subjects in the profilmic world—the fishermen, the fish, the sea, and so forth; and that of the filmmakers.

Although it is difficult to distinguish these three levels with any real clarity, let us nonetheless consider the experience of the spectators first. By Castaing-Taylor's account, he and Paravel did not wish to create a film that dominates the spectator, that tells the viewer what to think by providing some unitary account of the world, which would amount to "an abdication of aesthetic, intellectual and political responsibility, because it is reducing the world to something that the filmmaker is pretending to be able to give you certain pronouncements about, to edify the audience" (Castaing-Taylor and Paravel 2013b). This mythical spectatorial freedom is undermined, although not only by the impact that the film has on spectators: after all, as has been repeatedly suggested, *Leviathan* immerses them in a watery hell, overwhelms them, and leaves them gasping for air alongside the discarded body parts of the poor animals who were most definitely harmed in the making of this film. Indeed, the overwhelming nature of this immersive experience raises a question: why is the *embodied* experience induced in a spectator not considered an imposition or a constraint on the spectator? What sort of freedom does a spectator retain in his or her—dare I say blind—embodied responses to overwhelming stimuli? Can one not speak of an embodied oppression of the spectator, one perhaps as ominous as that of the sorts of conceptual domination that an authoritative voiceover might impose?

But what of the experience of the workers and the things in the profilmic world more generally? Jean-Luc Godard somewhere said that it is impossible to represent work, for various reasons, but I would say that one of *Leviathan*'s singular achievements is to provide us with images of contemporary industrial labor that are, if not new, at least very rare and seldom seen. *Leviathan*'s great and seldom mentioned precursors, John Grierson's *The Drifters* (1929) and *Granton Trawler* (1934), made great strides toward representing work at sea, and although space does not allow full consideration here, one should at least register the degree to which a film like *Granton Trawler*, in particular, not only provides a thematic ancestor to *Leviathan*, but also developed a visual lexicon from which *Leviathan* borrows and which it updates for a hi-def world, as can be seen in its images of the black surface of the sea, the omnipresent gulls, the repetitive tasks of the fisherman drawing on lines and gutting sea creatures, and the mucilaginous close-ups of dead and dying fish. The newness of *Leviathan*'s images thus depends, in part, on a broader historical forgetting of what cinema has done before. (Compare Figure 1 and 2 with figures 10 and 12 in the color gallery.)

But the sense of newness and rawness of *Leviathan*'s experience also emerges from two other formal features already briefly mentioned (among many that must remain unmentioned for reasons of space). One is the "thickness" of the film's depiction, the particular manner in which these images and sounds of work accumulate both serially over time and simultaneously as layerings of image with sound. Thus, often, images of the seamen at work—shucking scallops, for example—are filled out by multiple layers of sound, and it is through this sound montage that the film perhaps most effectively "touches" the spectator and permits him or her that uncanny sensory experience Merleau-Ponty has described of being touched and doing the touching at the same time. The thickness, though, of these depictions, does not provide what one could call a contextualization beyond the immediate space of the boat and the patch of sea where it finds itself; they instead serve to fill out the apparent immediacy of the embodied moment.

So, as thick as these depictions might be, they are a long way from Clifford Geertz's notion of thick description to which Castaing-Taylor and Paravel allude, and a sense of this distance should be noted. Geertz's concept of culture was a semiotic one, and for him the thickness of description arose from much that Paravel and Castaing-Taylor generally shun. Thickness arises in the ethnographic account, and culture itself is virtually identical with "context": "culture is not a power,

FIGURES 1 & 2. *Granton Trawler* (John Grierson 1934). © Royal Mail Group Ltd 2015, courtesy of The British Postal Museum and Archive.

something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described" (Geertz 1973:14). Geertz's interpretive stance is clearly not shared by Paravel and Castaing-Taylor, but a brief detour through Geertz might let us understand just what is foreclosed in their anti-interpretive turn.[7] Recall, for example, Geertz's famous example of trying to comprehend the actions of some young boys winking, or, rather, some young boys "rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes," as a thin description might have it. These winks, although identical in their physical movement, have vastly different significances: one is a twitch, the other a conspiratorial gesture. Only a thick description would reveal this. But for Paravel and Castaing-Taylor, such discursive clarity that thick description would provide is at odds with their project; as Paravel has put it (in a discussion of *Foreign Parts*, made with J.P. Sniadecki), such imposition of meaning through the interpretive act would impose upon an unacceptable level of "semiotic coding and decoding that *disembodies* the world and *cuts off* viewers from the pro-filmic world in the very act of seeming to provide them with authoritative knowledge about it" (Paravel and Sniadecki 2012; emphasis added). But without that "semiotic coding and decoding" the gestures become deeply ambiguous, no matter how thickly layered the depiction might be. For Paravel and Castaing-Taylor, in that ambiguity lies something like a respect for the integrity of the profilmic world and simultaneously the hope for the freedom of the spectator: "Eschewing narration affords viewers greater freedom to confront the real and to make sense of the film on their own terms" (Paravel and Sniadecki 2012).

It is not clear, though, how to square such a respect for the profilmic world in all of its ambiguity with spectatorial freedom. To put it with some exaggeration, spectatorial freedom amounts then to the permission for the spectator to do what she wishes with the world she views and hears, to "confront" but nonetheless "make sense of it on his or her terms." Paradoxically, this can produce an almost perfect conceptual imperialism, an almost pure idealism, which in the end is a most ironic gesture for an aesthetic that "opposes the traditions of art that are not deeply infused with the real" (SEL 2015).

My point here is perhaps best grasped by briefly considering another product of the SEL, Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez's *Manakamana* (2013), a film about pilgrims in Nepal that provides virtually no semiotic coding. Irina Leimbacher's (2014) description of the viewing experience of *Manakamana* strikes me as utterly accurate: "As a viewer we [sic!] are not sure who or what is looking, how present the recording apparatus is to the subjects, and what their engagement is with the camera and the people behind it, if any. It is only through subtle hints in the texture of the image and the comments of the passengers that we slowly come up with hypotheses" (36). But I wonder about the sufficiency of this act of "coming up with hypotheses" when it concerns other human beings, and in particular human beings who are the subject of an ethnography, sensory or otherwise. An ethical issue arises here and one must ask: What are the ethical implications of such an act of viewing, or of putting the viewers into such a position, that they are left with merely "making hypotheses" about the people they are viewing, especially when the people being viewed have no control over their own depictions, thick or thin? Or, to put it another way, is it an abdication of aesthetic, intellectual, and political responsibility if one *refuses* to provide an

interpretation of the world viewed, and instead leaves the viewers to makes sense of that world on their own terms, and perhaps thereby leave them to project onto that world a whole host of preconceptions with which they approach the film?

The second factor that contributes to the newness and rawness of *Leviathan* is of course its widely celebrated use of new camera technologies, in particular small "GoPro" cameras that were deployed in all manner of creative and unexpected ways. One consequence of the use of these cameras is a sort of radicalization of point of view, something registered in MacDonald's comment that we experience the labor of the filmmakers from inside their experience, such that the viewer's experience of the profilmic world and of the "filmmakers' experience" coincide. But as with the notion of immersion, I think we should keep in mind the degree to which GoPro footage has itself become something of a cliché today; the cameras have become as ubiquitous in certain realms, such as outdoor sports, as cell phones have become in general daily life.[8] I do not mean to suggest, of course, that one cannot generate novel perspectives and images with hackneyed technology, but we have to acknowledge the degree to which the GoPro, in concert with the distribution apparatus of "social media" that is central to the camera's astonishing commercial success, has become a constitutive a priori of experience today. As such, the GoPro has not only become a central part of the way in which experience is enframed, rendering whatever immediacy it conveys of experience deeply historical, but the GoPro has become, as Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt might put it, the *horizon* of experience, both medium of experience and the final measure whereby one can confirm that experience has been had, that, indeed, one has *experienced an experience*.[9]

There is a striking moment, however, when *Leviathan* provides a dawning sense of the mediatedness of the GoPro's apparent immediacy: toward the end of the film, there is a shot of some four minutes in length, statically framed, of a fisherman in the boat's galley, watching television. He slowly falls asleep. Apparently, he is watching *Deadliest Catch*, a reality TV series about commercial fishing (see figure 16 in the color gallery).[10] At this moment, when the camera finally sits still, a critical perspective opens up, situating the film—perhaps—in the context of the contemporary mediascape; it becomes aware of its own existence as a highly mediatized object.[11] But there seems to me to be a more plausible reading of this moment, for *Deadliest Catch* appears acousmatically like so much threatening cultural trash that cannot help but anesthetize the fisherman who watches, and against this degraded form, *Leviathan* appears to be simultaneously sublime and immediate, capable of conveying experience in all its fullness and gravity. *Deadliest Catch*, then, functions as a placeholder for all those forms of cinema that sensory ethnography opposes, and this moment of apparent self-reflexivity turns out to be a moment of the self-affirmation of the film's form itself; it is as if the film were saying here that we do not have before us the fictionalized and commodified account of the world of reality TV, but instead we have *the* deadliest catch, *experienced* experience, the *real* real.[12]

Thus, this explicit cultural reference in *Leviathan* serves not only to reinforce its claims for generic superiority, but also the degree to which its ambitions to immerse itself in the real are short circuited. Fredric Jameson has argued that in the postmodern authentic or full representations of the past have become impossible, and we are now condemned, with enfeebled senses of historical time, "to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach" (Jameson 1984:71). This is the hallmark of what Jameson calls the "nostalgia film." But today, despite the sheer domination of our temporal sense by the immediate moment, even the present itself remains out of reach, and we can perhaps best characterize a film like *Leviathan* in similar terms: it seeks the fullness of the present via the detour through our own pop cultural images of the present but also through the very media and technologies—if the two can in any meaningful sense be kept separate any longer—that have rendered such fullness impossible, and the attempt to reach beyond the visible horizon to that invisible of this world only occurs through the reference to reality TV, synecdoche for the wider mediascape, a highly attenuated stand-in for what the real invisible is. For Jameson, the "realism" that might still inhere in postmodern genres such as the nostalgia film derives from the shock of grasping that we are constrained to grasp the real world only via our mental images of that world, drawn on the "confining walls" of a fully culturalized "objective spirit" (Jameson 1984:71). Ultimately, of course, that constraining power is named by Jameson as "the system" itself—the broader body of late capitalism—and it is that, it strikes me, which is the true "invisible" of the sorts of bodily and experiential immediacies that *Leviathan* makes visible; that is, the "invisible *of* this world" that hovers beyond the horizon of the visible like a threatening weather formation yet to appear on our radars, but already buffeting us with its winds.

But there is little in *Leviathan* to cleave open a perspective onto that sublime object from which we could assess and perhaps master our relationship to it, and instead we remain within the nightmarish present

of the film. This nightmare is not one of some impending catastrophic transformation that we must or perhaps cannot ward off, such as the rising seas of global warming, about which we have all been warned already. No, the nightmare that this film projects, and for which it offers no imagined escape other than to fall asleep while watching TV, is that all of this—the waves crashing aboard the ship, the blood spilling overboard, the skates and rays being hacked to pieces, the decapitated heads of glorious fish the likes of which we have never seen sliding about like bowling balls, the incessant cracking open of the scallop shells by the workers, and the relentless battering and brutal noise—will just keep on going on ad infinitum, most likely uploaded to Youtube, generating on a cosmic scale a kind of repetitive motion disorder like that we can only guess is brutally suffered by the workers on-screen. This helps explain why it is a commonplace that the at times histrionic reviewers feel a relief to leave the theatre, happy to have lived through the experience: the film offers little utopian perspective to thwart the eternal present that it constructs. But it is at least a virtue of the film that our present comes off as a horrid torment, and we can imagine with some effort that human society is not that distant from that of the ubiquitous Hitchcockian gulls we see in the film. They are constantly in motion, occasionally throwing themselves at the sea to grab a piece of cast-off fish guts, condemned to beat their wings relentlessly, no land in sight, just a vast black sea of total yet simulacral plenitude, filled to the brim with something, but utterly empty of hope.

Notes

[1] For a useful overview of the history or prehistory of sensory ethnography as practiced by Castaing-Taylor and Paravel, see Nakamura (2013), who points to the particular importance of the influence of the work of Robert Gardner and David and Judith MacDougall. MacDonald (2013) also emphasizes Gardner's influence on Castaing-Taylor and Paravel. A broader history, for which there is no space here, would have to acknowledge further influences as well, and a quick list would need to include, among others, Vittorio de Seta, Georges Rouquier, and John Grierson, whom I discuss briefly below. As Nakamura also points out, sensory ethnography is not the domain solely of Castaing-Taylor and his colleagues and students at Harvard, but my focus here is primarily on his and Paravel's use of the form.

[2] This passage is cited repeatedly in Kluge's work. See, for example, a paraphrase in the 1965 essay "Word and Film" (Kluge et al. 1988:88), which provides an extended reflection on the expressive differences of language and cinema.

[3] I discuss Kluge's use of Kant at some length in *The Utopia of Film* (2013: 159–171).

[4] In replies to versions of this essay delivered as a talk at the conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, 2014, and at the Visible Evidence documentary conference in 2013.

[5] Indeed, the very idea that the film "exists before interpretation" is itself a remarkable display of fetishistic disavowal.

[6] Cited in Taylor (1996:80). Original from Sobchack (1992:3).

[7] This anti-interpretive turn puts Castaing-Taylor and Paravel, and perhaps sensory ethnography more generally, in the company of a host of current theoretical tendencies gaining currency in contemporary academic humanities, including "surface reading" and "just reading," among others. For a critique of the ideology of these theories, which like sensory ethnography often present themselves as precisely *nontheoretical*, as well as for a contextualization of these theories as a conservative response to the crisis of the humanities in the university today, see Lesjak (2013).

[8] For a journalistic account of GoPro's rapid rise to near ubiquity and the consequences for contemporary experience, see Paumgarten (2014).

[9] As a popular Internet discussion board slogan has it: "Without pics, none of this happened."

[10] Interestingly enough, Castaing-Taylor and Paravel were apparently unhappy with the audio in this scene when they first heard it. They did not want the TV sound to be audible, so they reedited the scene with the sound lowered. In the versions of the film I have seen, both in the theater and online in a version provided by the Canadian distributor, the audio is clearly audible.

[11] In his "Introduction" to *Transcultural Cinema*, a collection of the writings of David MacDougall, Castaing-Taylor is aware of the risks represented by moments such as this for any documentary made in our current world, where "hypermediatization" is "inimical to the development of documentary," threatening at every turn to leave any film "recycled as raw material in the simulation of an other 'reality' deprived of all . . . actuality" (Taylor 1998:17).

[12] *Leviathan* can be situated in a long history of documentary films that, in manifesto-like fashion, assert the superiority of their medium over other contemporary media. Dziga Vertov, for example, in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), lambasted sentimental dramas and what he called "cinematography" (*kinochestvo*) in remarkably similar fashion to *Leviathan*'s portrayal of reality TV: a poster for a German romance seems to be keeping a young girl asleep. And, as Jeanne Hall (1998) has argued, *Don't Look Back* (W. D. A. Pennebaker 1967) asserts the superiority of Pennebaker's version of documentary cinema over contemporary television and print media, a conscious agenda that stands askance to the film's claim to present an unadorned and unprejudiced view of the world.

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