7. Valentini 1993, p. 11. On this idea of 'inner visions' see the catalogue for another huge solo exhibition on Viola in Rome at Palazzo delle Esposizioni in 2008-2009. See also Perov 2008.
8. The film rebuilds Viola's artistic journey through a mix of interviews with Viola and Perov, also seven international scholars and critics who are experts in Viola's art: Raymond Bellour, Nadeije Dagen, Anne-Marie Duguet, Alain Fleischer, Jean de Loisy, Valentini, and Neutres.
9. See Townsend 2004, p. 9.

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# 'Leviathan': From sensory ethnography to gallery film

Malin Wahlberg

*Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhookor tie down its tongue with a rope? Can you put a cord through its noseor pierce its jaw with a hook?* (Job 41)

I entered the doors of the Whitney Biennial (7 March – 25 May 2014) with the specific aim of attending the 2pm screening of *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Véréna Paravel, 2013), one of the most frequently-referenced films in the context of

contemporary documentary. I was about to see a gallery film version in order to challenge my scholarly preconceptions of *Leviathan* 'the sensory ethnography doc'. Thus, I missed the opportunity, as suggested by the museum booklet, to 'look broadly at different types of work and various modes of working that can be called contemporary American art'.

Since 1973 the aim of the Whitney Biennial has been to show a representative chart of contemporary American art, often with the explicit intention to support young artists and to cover a variety of techniques in different media. The 2014 exhibition did follow up on the decision from last year to include work by international artists, also by the recently deceased (among others: Sarah Charlesworth, Gretchen Bender, Tony Greene, Malachi Ritscher, and other prominent people such as Prof. Allan Sekula and writer David Foster Wallace). The diversity of the works on display in terms of subjects, different media, and techniques was even more pronounced this year since three guest curators – one for each floor of the museum – were invited to select what totaled 103 participants. Curator Stuart Comer characterises his 'Third Floor' Biennial selection, including *Leviathan*, with the keywords 'hybrid art', 'interdisciplinary', and 'the multiple roles of the white cube, the theater, the cinema, and the publishing forum'.[1]

The following reflection on *Leviathan* will be less informed by its possible relations to the other works exhibited on the Third Floor than by its presentation and embodied extension from the film screen to the gallery wall and the black box at the Whitney. A logical point of departure is provided by the recent buzz that Castaing-Taylor and Paravel's projects have created among documentary critics and scholars in the context of experimental ethnography and digital media. *Leviathan* has been praised as a film that defies narration while exemplifying a new take on the observational mode commonly associated with ethnographic cinema.

It results from the filmmakers' longstanding attempts to explore the sensory and tactile elements of the filmed motif and the soundscape beyond the limiting prospect of any enclosed narrative or a more authoritarian direction of cinematography and editing. Ohad Ladesman notes that with the earlier achievement of *Sweetgrass* (Ilisa Barbash, Lucien Castaing-Taylor, 2009), Castaing-Taylor was still in the realm of ethnographic representation, although experimentation with sound recording and cameras attached to the subjects' bodies added a striking, spectacular dimension to the framing and voicing of the Allestad family and their last sheep drive into 'Montana's ruggedly dangerous Absaroka-Beartooth range north of Yellowstone'.

In his 1996 essay 'Iconophobia', Castaing-Taylor testified to his taste for 'multiple interpretations' and a desire to further invest in the promises of an observational mode quite different from the aesthetics of direct cinema. *Leviathan* unfolds as a sound-image spectacle that in many ways operates beyond the familiar 'crisis structure', intentional gaze, and performed social gesture that we associate with direct cinema. Ladesman makes a wonderful point as he reassesses the familiar 'fly-on-the-wall' trope to suggest that in *Leviathan* the work onboard an industrial fishing vessel is rather framed and orchestrated from the embodied perspective of the fly itself:

> [b]ecause of their spherical shape and protrusion from the fly's head, the eyes give the fly an almost 360-degree view of the world. Thus, a fly sees in a mosaic way – thousands of tiny images coalesce and together represent one visual image.[2]

Most reviewers have praised the strong immersive effect produced by *Leviathan*. Adjectives such as 'visceral', 'compelling', 'embodied', or 'disembodied' viewing have met with the recurrent question of the purpose or meaning of the film as a representation, a dystopian tale inspired by the book of Job, as a critique of industrial fishing, of environmental problems, and the capital society at large. Critics have been impressed by the overall ambiguous invocation of the apocalypse – but, to paraphrase Zadie Smith, the apocalypse 'is always usefully cast into the future', and *Leviathan* is perhaps most of all an elegy for 'our profound, historical attraction to apocalypse'[3] rather than a terrifying sign of the times. Rather than any call for action regarding how to actually save the seas and the planet the visual leitmotif of waste and exploitation may accord with the biblical 'Oh, what have we done!' With the exception of the brief quote from Job inserted at the end of the film as a few lines of running text in gothic font, this association belongs to one of many different possible readings. As a gallery film the impressive display of digital sound-images and the ambiguous invocation of sea and sea creatures seem to nullify the importance of symbolic closure.

What is striking in the predominant reception of *Leviathan* is the submissive attitude of the critics and scholars towards the intentions of the filmmakers and the scientific lab in question, as if the Harvard-based Sensory Ethnography Lab would automatically provide a legitimacy that commands us to build our interpretations of this film on the statements delivered by the directors and the producers. The gallery context helped me to shift focus from the predominant interpretations to the very screen event at hand, to also think about the film in terms of machine vision and poetic re-enactment in the age of digital filmmaking. In my opinion the major attraction of *Leviathan* consists in the peculiar combination of movement, change, *and* contemplation.

A phenomenological claim of classical film theory is that velocity works against contemplation. In the work of André Bazin and others there is the recognition of the human gesture in film, which demands the duration of a shot and the direction of an intentional gaze. In cinema, Roger Leenhardt argued, there is a specific temporal mode for each gesture: 'a brief moment for the amused smile a moderate duration for the indifferent face, and a long duration for sadness and suffering'.[4] I thought of this as I lay back on one of the soft cushions to look into the opening black image of *Leviathan*. As unidentified shapes of red, orange, and bright yellow appeared and disappeared out of the dark frame and the dramatic, muffled sound of machines, roaring sea, and splashing water filled the room, I was impressed by the impact of the full screen that covered the entire wall. With the audience virtually at sea level, we were engaged in a mode of contemplation – although far beyond the duration and framing of any Bazinian realism.

What the gallery setting seemed to reinforce was the pulsating sound-image attraction of digital machine vision, which belongs to the formal experimentation at hand and the project to change something in the relation between the film and

its audience. With few exceptions the gestures of the fishermen have been fragmented into compelling details, while the point-of-view is disembodied, unpredictable, and the result of small waterproof GoPro cameras. These cameras were attached to the fishermen and the film crew's bodies or hats, to the slippery floor, poked into the chaos of not-yet-dead creatures, and placed on sticks that can be directed at objects, events, and even put into the water and into motion, as the vessel itself speeds up. Along with the engine sounds, the slimy noise of rattling fish, and the auditory drama of wind and water, a regular work shift at an industrial fishing vessel is both subject to representation and the subject of a spectacular screen event. There was a rhythm and tempo in the repetitive actions of hauling in huge nets, cutting fish, and throwing the excessive amounts of fish remains overboard; also a rhythm and tempo in the frame, and in the unfolding of edited images and sounds. I was reminded of Laura U. Marks' suggestion that in digital video 'the image's origin is less important than the decision to actualize the virtual image in a particular way'.[5] The fragmented vision and digital sound of *Leviathan* results in a sensory spatiality with new, surprising effects for a cinematic mode of contemplation in the gallery space.

In the black box the screening time is set in order to reduce distractions and secure audience attention throughout the entire film, as opposed to looped videos and installations, where the room and the visitor's non-directed path are built-in facets of a multiscreen projection or an interactive work.[6] Unfortunately, the proverbial sound problem of the gallery film made way for the recurring frame-breaking event of violin music from the installation next door, which tended to ruin the *Leviathan* soundscape. Also, several times during the screening the black cloth covering the doorway was pushed aside and people entered either to stay or,

most often, to watch a few glimpses of dead fish and sea gulls in strange angles, only to rush on to the next installation. Distractions such as these bring attention to the gallery room as a social space marked by rules and rituals that are very different from those of the movie theatre.

Shifting focus from the ethnography of the gallery space to the supposed ethnographic project of *Leviathan*, the question is where to locate 'the thrill of the real' and how to account for social representation in this film? Christopher Pavsek laments the empty language game of critics and scholars lost in the murky waters of phenomenology, or visual anthropologists who celebrate *Leviathan* in terms of an innovative ethnographic practice. What does it mean to be 'engulfed' in moving images or 'immersed' in the rolling sea or the swash of water projected on the wall? Pavsek argues that the film entirely sidesteps the ethnographic project and 'the tricky task of representing the other'.[7] Devoid of any speaking subjects or intentional framing, the fishermen and the dead fish obtain a similar status as spectacular motifs. The individual fisherman has been fragmented into close-ups of muscles, perspiration, grimaces, skin, tattoos, or the stark yellow of a raincoat. But it is exactly this obsession with the material feel of objects and organic texture and the related auditory nuances of edited sound that are being conveyed and transformed by the digital optics of this film. Only once – in a unique static long take where one of the fishermen sits staring at a television set (the camera placed behind and slightly above the television) – did I recognise Leenhardt's long duration for sadness, suffering, and, we may add, exhaustion. However, this is a sequence more reminiscent of European art cinema (Bresson, Akerman, Haneke, Kaurismäki) than of American Direct Cinema. A stylistic choice added to this impression: the sound of a television ad has been edited to match perfectly with the work environment and the supposed brotherhood onboard.

*Leviathan* accomplishes a stunning exploration of digital sound-images and their sensory impact. This film brings attention to the medium itself, to the very process through which registered glimpses of reality transform and become re-enacted into an imaginary whole. The pulsating quality of takes combined and contrasted to the muffled soundscape was something that seemed even more poignant in the gallery room. The experience of rhythm and velocity took on a sculptural dimension, with occasional effects similar to 3D – an impression completed by the scale of the screen/museum wall and the physical awareness of the room as an important facet of the installation.

In the context of documentary cinema acceleration tends to be either a matter of intentional juxtaposition (by editing) or a sign of claimed authenticity: the shaky street scenes testify to a camera out of control, to a cameraman at the epicenter of an unfolding drama. *Leviathan* strives for another kind of visceral authenticity. In this case there is no technological imperfection to grant our satis-

faction with shaky images. The chance-element of imperfect sound in Direct Cinema is, to quote Eirik Frisvold Hanssen, replaced by 'a surrender to the unpredictability of the apparatus, an exploration of the specific ways the simple, portable GoPro cameras register and interpret a chaotic reality, and the unexpected effects that ensue, including striking and stylized colour'.[8] We, the part of the gallery audience who remain on our floor puffs throughout the screening, are gradually being indulged in a cinematic adventure where new digital attractions have added to the longstanding magic of camera inscription and editing. The unfolding, orchestrated series of *sensory* views in flux call for contemplation and demand to be seen from beginning to end. To fully appreciate the details of this film you would have to stay on your cushion to see the beauty of the montage and the unfolding of an imaginary realm with symbolic implications, or a screen event open to the projection of your own desires and anxieties.

## Notes

1. Comer & Elms & Grabner 2014
2. Ladesman 2014.
3. Smith 2014.
4. Wahlberg 2008, p. 79.
5. Marks 2002, p. 151.
6. Fowler 2004.
7. Pavsek 2014.
8. Hanssen 2014.

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