
LEVIATHAN. ENACTION AND ONTOLOGICAL UNCONSCIOUS IN AN ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM THAT CHALLENGES ANTHROPOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

After reviewing the main interpretations of the film *Leviathan* by Lucien Castaing Taylor and Véréna Paravel, most of which are based on the concept of “immersivity”, Francesco Marano proposes to see the film as an example of enactive style and to contextualize the film in the recent “ontological turn” of anthropology. In this way Marano tries to bring the film back into the ethnographic genre from which some authors have ousted it, asking anthropology to expand its boundaries rather than strengthen them.

KEYWORDS

BIO

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In 2013 Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V erena Paravel made *Leviathan*, an 88-minute film about deep-sea fishing that takes place on an American fishing boat. The film was made off the coast of New Bedford, Massachusetts - once the whaling capital of the world, now the largest port hosting over five hundred fishing boats each month. *Leviathan* films one of these boats using an arsenal of GoPro cameras that move freely in the environment, from the underwater level to the point of view of the seagulls.

The film was produced within the activities of the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University (SEL), a laboratory for young experimentalist filmmakers with anthropological training. Among them, J.P. Sniadecki, Stephanie Spray, Libbie Dina Cohn and Diana Allan (Henley 2020: 421- 452). As stated on the SEL website:

The Sensory Ethnography Lab is an experimental laboratory that promotes innovative combinations between aesthetics and ethnography using analog and digital media, installations and performances to explore the aesthetics and ontology of the natural and non-natural world. By exploiting perspectives from the arts, natural, social and human sciences, SEL encourages attention to the multiple dimensions of the world, both animate and inanimate, which can only with difficulty be returned by words (<https://sel.fas.harvard.edu/>)

The film has solicited numerous criticisms and reflections both on the interpretative level and on that of the ethnographic method, placing itself between artistic practices and anthropology. Given its circulation as an installation in various galleries and museums of contemporary art¹, this film challenges to rethink the "ethnographic" genre of the documentary as well as the relationship between aesthetics and anthropology within ethnographic representations and the mission of anthropology itself.

Vol. 31, n. 1, 2015 of *Visual Anthropology Review* (VAR) collects several critical and analytical contributions on the film. The general impression one gets is that although all the texts capture some relevant aspect, the film seems to have an autonomous life and always manages to escape the desire to dominate it through an exhaustive interpretation. Here is a summary of some selected interventions in which the most relevant points of the contributions are highlighted.

Alanna Thain interprets *Leviathan* using the concept of flying over - *survoler* - here exemplified by the action of the seagulls present in the film and earlier proposed by Raymond Ruyer in his work *N eo-finalisme* as a helpful interpretation

to criticize and correct the persistent impression we have of thinking that we perceive the world as exposed before us, as observed from an additional dimension. In media practices and studios this is both simulated and described as 'first person perspective' [...]. Part of *Leviathan's* excitement and challenge is in the way the film operates through bodily intense sensations that are ambiguously embodied, producing a subjectivity that does not operate simply from a human point of view [...] *Survoler*, as a tactic of sensory ethnography, rejects the corrective distance from the sensation as a way of knowing the world, proposing an immanent alternative to a politics of representation through the ethical-aesthetic experience (Thain 2015: 42).

Still based on Raymond Ruyer's philosophy, Thain points out that sensation is not just perception, it is a real act of knowledge:

Sensation is an act of knowledge, not pure observation, because it is the act of a being already in the world, capable of grasping meanings and having a sense of the 'other' - a sense / feeling as primitive as the intuition of its very existence. Pure observation will never be knowledge, but only an event, an exchange of energy. Pure knowledge remains virtual, since it will not give us any details on the 'other'. It is the combination of observation and knowledge in the sensation of the primordial organic self-subjective consciousness of the living being - and of the physical events on the sense organ - that allow a 'detailed knowledge' of other beings (Ruyer 1952: 127).

¹ *Leviathan* has been exhibited at the Whitney Biennial (7 March – 25 May 2014), at Everson Museum of Art di Syracuse (17 settembre-24 ottobre 2015), at the Marian Goodman Gallery in London as well as several other galleries.

Thain identifies in the film a "relational ecology" based on immersion, without this heading towards a specific end - underlining how GoPro's do not occupy the point of view of human social actors and remain embodied in the matter itself as ambiguous observers.

This issue of a 'disembodied' vision - that is, not belonging to a subject - returns in the essay by Eirik Frisvold Hanssen. Castaing-Taylor himself describes the sensations he felt while watching the film:

Watching our footage we were struck by a paradox, that we felt as if we were looking at moving images and sounds that were simultaneously separated from the subjective [optical POV] shoulder shots that one associates with documentaries and especially non-film cinema fiction; they seemed to be completely disembodied and separated from the director's intentionality. And yet they seemed to be much more tied to a subjective embodied experience of the world than when you are actually in that world - not when you are making a movie. Thus they were both embodied and disembodied, a kind of objective manifestation of a subjective experience (Lucien Castaing-Taylor, in Jaremko-Greenwold 2013).

Stevenson and Kohn point out how the absence of voices in *Leviathan* is a problem for anthropology.

Without a single, individual, speaking subject, or a stable perspective, what can we say about what the film 'is saying'? [...] In refusing to let the 'natives' speak, *Leviathan's* detractors are concerned. The filmmakers have reduced the political reach of a film that could have said a lot about capitalism and class, the environment and the fishing industry. It is a well-known topic: if anthropology is unable to do anything, at least it can give a voice to the people it studies (Stevenson and Kohn 2015: 50).

The very figures of the people do not stand out clearly, we see them blurred, confused, moved by the movements of the fishing boat in the waves, as in a nightmare. In this I believe I can read a further strategy of the filmmakers aimed at rendering the density of relationships and the non-separability of the subjects. The fishermen's voices are reduced to indefinite sounds, and thus the ability of the voice to structure the space "around" is lost thanks to the work on sounds by Ernst Karel - whose contribution "dissolves the artificial boundaries between human voices and others, allowing us to hear something else" (Idem: 51). On the other hand - Stevenson and Kohn write - do not the eyes of the beheaded fish speak to us? Likewise, do not fishermen's bodies speak to us about the repetitiveness of work, do not they give voice to the vulnerability of the body when working in extreme conditions? And the fisherman who vainly tries to resist sleep in front of the television broadcasting the Deadliest Catch reality show about offshore fishing, wasn't he dreaming of the movie? And aren't we ourselves, looking at *Leviathan*, sinking in the sea of his dream?

Looking at *Leviathan*, are we not falling into the vast sea of his dream? What can happen - we wonder - if we allow this *Leviathan*, this sea monster from a movie, to swallow us whole, to dream of itself through us? What would happen if we dived into its sea depths? [...] What would happen if we thought of *Leviathan* more as an ethnographic dream than a film, one in which recognizing the reality of our world means abandoning the sovereign Self on which so much of our critical power has hitherto depended? What happens when we allow the depths that the film evokes to come closer to us? What happens if we accept that our reference points disappear? In this terrifying space, what other types of connections to the world become possible? (Idem: 51-52).

Stevenson and Kohn observe that the presence of the numerous GoPros dissolves the idea of a single protagonist. Following the images they show, our individual integrity as spectator also dissolves: "we are submerged and dissipated by drowning in the depths of *Leviathan* [...] and perhaps we gain the possibility of a kind of sympathetic resonance with all the beings, foreign and familiar, that this sea monster envelops" (Idem: 52).

Then, citing Kaya Silverman (2009), they argue that the dream with its associations allows us to resonate with other beings beyond us, taking us beyond our limits, an ethical as well as political practice in a world that is extending beyond us human, "in this ethnographic dream we become the dark depths of the ocean. We are conquered by this other world" (Idem: 52). In this way *Leviathan* enters the center of the issues addressed by the ontological turn in anthropology, which has allowed us to enter our field of observation and relationship with other beings besides humans, and "provides a sensory method that allows for these realities to show themselves. In this sense it could be thought of as a kind of ontological

poetics (Kohn 2015), opening us to the terrifying world of other types of reality” (Idem: 52). It is in this sense - Kohn writes - that *Leviathan* is a political film, because it teaches us to listen to the multiple voices of this world beyond our own, going beyond the need to give a voice to the fishermen of New England, whilst developing an ethnographic harmony with the voices of our world.

Ohad Landesman argues that *Leviathan's* style is far from observational cinema and rather seeks to find new ways of participatory observation. Renouncing the description, it focuses on the relationship between the filmmaker and reality and tries to separate the sounds from their sources to communicate a sense of indeterminacy.

It is difficult to understand what we are looking at, where we are positioned or whose point of view we are incorporating. We cling to the sound, which also does not help us orient ourselves [...] We are saturated by a chaotic mosaic of small details and only our imagination can help us to put those things in some form of spatial perspective [...] *Leviathan* generates an experience of immediate reality that is corporeal and prelinguistic. (Landesman 2015: 15).

The film constructs the viewer as a "kinesthetic subject", a term that Landesman borrows from Sobchack - who in turn uses Merleau-Ponty to explain it.

[A kinesthetic subject] defines the viewer of the film (and, therefore, the filmmaker) who - through an incorporated vision informed by the knowledge of the other senses - 'makes sensitive' what is it to 'see' a film, both 'in the flesh' and in that 'of which it speaks' [...] The kinesthetic subject touches and is touched by the screen - able to convert seeing into touching and vice versa without a thought - and through a sensory and intermodal activity, is able to experience the film as here and there, rather than to clearly place the place of the cinematic experience as on or off the field. As a lived body and spectator, the kinesthetic subject subverts the prevailing objectification of vision that would reduce the sensory experience of films to an impoverished 'cinematic view' or place anorexic theories of identification that have no flesh, that cannot digest 'a feast for the eyes' (Sobchack 2004: 71).

The conception of the spectator as a kinesthetic subject recalls the idea - mentioned by Landesman - of the skilful vision proposed by Cristina Grasseni, according to which vision is not separated from the activity of the other senses, but is rather always "incorporated in multisensory practices where the gaze is coordinated with expert movement, with rapid changes of point of view or with other senses such as touch" (Grasseni 2010: 4).

At the end of his article, Landesman almost seems to throw in the towel, but at the same time underlines the full place of *Leviathan* in the history of the ethnographic film in continuity with the observational film:

it is almost impossible, given its open and unconventional structure, to understand exactly what the filmmakers wanted to achieve in *Leviathan* and what should be the 'right way' to read it [...] [*Leviathan*] offers a futuristic conception of a post-human world where human beings may not have the innate right to place themselves above nature [...] It nourishes the pleasure of contemplation very well, empowering the viewer with the freedom to observe things calmly and intelligently [...] I proposed that *Leviathan* should not necessarily be interpreted through a breakthrough discourse that describes it on the basis of his total novelty, but rather in terms of the continuity it establishes with the observational film approach, that has long dominated the practice of ethnographic filmmaking [...] *Leviathan* is not to be theorized simply as a generator of an exhaustive spectator experience, but as an important milestone in the development of new ways of understanding participation and experimentation in ethnographic encounters through the film (Landesman 2015: 18).

Christopher Pavsek points out that in the face of Lucien Castaing-Taylor's accusation of *iconophobia* against mainstream anthropology, he seems instead to be suffering from *logophobia* - due to Ernst Karel's systematic rejection of the word and the "cacophonous" use of sound. Moreover, despite the abundance of images of all kinds, "the experience that the film offers remains rather blind" (Pavsek 2015: 5). Based on Merleau-Ponty defining the invisible in terms of an "inexhaustible depth", Pavsek argues that the film's experience remains invisible "not only because of its rejection of the conceptual, but also as an effect of the way the film shows things" (idem).

Another observation of Pavsek concerns the association between experience and the contemporary cliché of immersion, a very widespread term to indicate an engaging experience. Pavsek also emphasizes the doubling of the term experience in Castaing-Taylor and Paravel's statement, when they say that their purpose was to give people "a very powerful aesthetic experience, to offer them a glimpse into a reality they had not experienced first hand - a protracted, painful, difficult, visceral deep embedded experience [...] Our desire was simply to give an experience of an experience [...] it is an 87-minute experience of being at sea, both metaphorically and literally" (Castaing-Taylor and Paravel 2013).

This "doubling", according to Pavsek, is not so much a detailed description of the filmic experience, of the act of seeing and being seen, as "an unconscious echo of the commodified world we live in today" (Pavsek 2015: 7). This immersive experience raises another question: although filmmakers intend to give up any kind of interpretation, what freedom does the viewer actually have? "Why is the spectator's embedded experience not considered a constraint or an imposition on the spectator?" (idem). Indeed, this question seems to me to involve an even more relevant consideration: whether concepts, interpretations and critical positions can only be communicated through a non-immersive distance and words (narrating voice or dialogues), or whether we think that "pure" filmic images can communicate an asignificant primary experience, then we are removing the images from their power to "say something" - thus bringing the body back to a biological conception that anthropology has long since surpassed: the body, we know, is always as cultural as it is biological. We have thus to ask ourselves, what is of cultural, learned, in this film's "asignificant" immersive experience. Furthermore, according to Pavsek, an ethical question arises:

What are the ethical implications of such an act of seeing or putting viewers in a position where they can only 'speculate' about the people they are watching - especially when the people who are being watched have no control over how they are described, whether in a dense or a thin way? Or, to put it another way, if one refuses to provide an interpretation of the observed world to let the viewers make sense of that world in their own terms - perhaps letting them project a whole series of preconceptions onto that world, with which they approach the film - isn't this an abdication of ethical, aesthetic and intellectual responsibility? (Pavsek 2015: 8-9).

Fundamental, or as Pavsek says, an "a priori" for communicating an immersive experience, is the use of the GoPro.

The GoPro has not only become a central part of the way the experience is framed - making everything in its immediacy convey a deeply historical experience. It has also become - as in the words of Alexander Kluge and Oscar Negt - the horizon of the experience, both an instrument of the experience and a final measure that confirms that that experience was lived: that someone has experienced an experience (Pavsek 2015: 10).

Leviathan, the mythical sea monster, becomes a metaphor for primordial chaos, an endless waking nightmare, which can only be escaped by falling asleep in front of the television like the fisherman in the film, "generating on a cosmic scale a sort of repetitive disorder in motion that we can only imagine how brutally it is suffered by the workers projected on the screen". This is a nightmare in which the seagulls represent us, "relentlessly condemned to flap their wings, no land in sight, only a vast black sea of total but simulacral fullness, full to the brim of something, but completely empty of hope" (idem).

Christopher Pinney also highlights *Leviathan's* immersive approach, declining the concept of "immersion" into "fluidity" and the "aesthetics of immersion". He then recalls the Sartrean concept of viscosity: viscosity "attacks the boundaries between myself and the other [...] Diving into the water gives a different impression. I remain solid, but touching the viscosity carries the risk of diluting myself in that viscosity" (quoted in Douglas 1966: 39). This fear of stickiness stems from a fear of language loss. Pinney cites MacDougall, as he writes that the use of language often serves to remove the visual "bomb" (Idem: 38).

Robert Gardner's ethno cinematographic work is recalled by Pinney:

Leviathan is Robert Gardner's practice fused with David MacDougall's philosophy and enormously magnified through the lens of a technical miracle. Think of the initial sequence of the fights and the creaking of the oars, which appears as a Wagnerian leitmotif in *Forest of Bliss*, amplified to infinity. This is

what happens when Benjamin's conception of what is 'native in the camera' finds its apotheosis in the GoPro and observational cinema is then 'blown up by dynamite in a tenth of a second' (Benjamin 1992: 229), or perhaps more precisely from the dynamite in ten targets. It is a magnificent result" (idem: 39).

In her contribution, Catherine Russell considers it necessary to question what kind of ethnography is that of *Leviathan*.

The return to experimentalism seems to be returning to the aestheticism to which I had responded in the Nineties. The lack of involvement of filmmakers with their subjects in terms of encounter or inquiry produces such a distance or displacement that the sociological is buried within the sensory effects produced by sound and image. The 'sensory ethnography' category borrows equally from experimental and ethnographic practices, but *Leviathan* seems to overturn the balance towards some sort of sensual and formal abstraction, beyond any capacity for cultural knowledge. Nonetheless, the film employs production technologies in such an innovative way that it causes a return to Walter Benjamin and his categories of humanism, technology and senses as coexisting in a theory of experience. (Russell 2015: 28)

According to Russell, the film seems to embody Benjamin's notion of "anthropological materialism". The reading by the German philosopher of Baudelaire's poetics in *Flowers of Evil* can help us understand *Leviathan*'s poetics: 'Benjamin had a lot of say on this work and its articulation in the ideas of melancholy and aura, through a struggle between' novelty 'and the repetitions of the' always the same 'in modernity" (Idem).

Russell notes that the personal experiences of claustrophobia and seasickness recounted in the interviews by Castaing-Taylor and Paravel are not present in the film, because their bodies are absent - which is very strange for an experimental film dealing with people. If there is an experience, this mainly concerns that of the spectator. Also, writes Russell, the film is so open that it ends up being mysterious. The lack of information and spatial references, the abstract shots, the sounds, the silent bodies of the fishermen and the absence of those of the filmmakers produce a "dehumanized aesthetic" (Russell 2015: 28).

Leviathan fits into Benjamin's question of the aura, of its loss caused by reproductive technologies, but at the same time of cinema as a means capable of restoring experience. GoPros go where the human eye cannot go. They show the "optical unconscious" and generate a disembodied experience in which fish, seagulls, men, objects are intertwined in a single superorganism. "Men's bodies are deeply entangled in the mechanism of the industrial fishing apparatus. Their voices mingle with the pulsating engines of the sound mix, and their movements form the links between the catch and the machinery of the boat" (Russell 2015: 30). I wonder if this superorganism is Nature or Capital. Technology is innervated in the experience, it becomes a second nature (or a second technology). This is Benjamin's "anthropological materialism": the theory of innervation that tells us that body and technology are not separate.

Russell believes that the experience of *Leviathan* can be perfectly evoked by *spleen*, a concept coined by Benjamin and Baudelaire to express the sense of a permanent catastrophe, that is all the more spectacular and engaging the more it is devoid of historical specificity.

The effect of experience is obtained at the price of historical specificity, and I believe that Benjamin's profound ambivalence regarding the film performance provides a model for theorising what is at stake in this ambivalence. Distorted realism tends to put the 'second' technologies of reproduction in the foreground, which are superimposed on the 'first' technologies of fishing and therefore causes a potential redemption of humanity within its state of alienation. On the other hand, the geopolitical specificity of the film tends to be understood within a mythical abstraction in which the show is emptied of its radical energies. The ghost of the *spleen* returns here in a truly extraordinary form, when the hellish cycles of work and kill are repeated every time the film is shown (Russell 2015: 33)

More recent contributions recognize in *Leviathan* the description of a non-anthropocentric world, where everything merges with the other. Paolo Favero writes: "it is probably this continuous fusion of human, animal and natural that made anthropologist and filmmaker David MacDougall declare, in a personal communication, that there is something 'cosmic' in the film" (Favero 2018: 90).

Critical is instead the position of Paul Henley, who in his recent *Beyond the Observation. A History of Authorship in Ethnographic Film* (2020), dedicates ample space to filmmakers trained at SEL and traces their

influences: 1) in American formalist avant-garde cinema, in particular in the work of Sharon Lockart and in his films consisting of a one long shot, like *Exit* (2008), or a long slow-motion shot like *Lunch Break* (2009); 2) in the aesthetics of John Dewey, which exalts the relationship between art and everyday life [Dewey 1934]; 3) in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to which the filmmakers of SEL allude "to support the importance of bodily experience as a way of engaging with the world, thus underlining the relative absence of discursive language in SEL films in favor of more sensory material" (Henley 2020: 424); 4) in Robert Gardner's films, in particular *Forest of Bliss* (1986), for the almost absence of dialogue and for the analogy between the role of Ernst Karel and that of Michael Chalufour, the sound editor of Gardner (Henley 2020: 425).

The same public statements by Lucien Castaing-Taylor, in which he argues the disinterest in any descriptive or explanatory content of the film, in favor of that "negative capability", as defined by the romantic poet John Keats - that is the ability to be remain uncertain - they lend their side to Henley's judgment that "it is difficult to see how this sincere disclaimer of any interest in facts or reasons is compatible with the general project of ethnography, as it is understood by most of its contemporary academic practitioners". (Henley 2020: 426).

I confess that the first time I saw *Leviathan*, I felt annoyed and impatient with a film that seemed to want to amaze me at all costs - despite the fact that it fascinated me emotionally - a bit like those many videos on YouTube made with the GoPro in which the protagonist, usually a sportsman, exhibits his performance and we are captured by the images. I tried to look at it several times, trying to find an interpretative key that would allow me to insert it into ethno-cinematographic practices. It seemed clear to me that it was, at the time, a unicum, also different from the other "contemplative" productions of the SEL² and from the previous film *Sweetgrass* by Lucien Castaing-Taylor. The GoPro "stunts" were joined by long still shots, like that of the captain falling asleep in front of the TV. In general, the film combines subjectivated (embodied) and desubjectivated / decorporalized (disembodied) modes. These different styles find their balance and coherent intertwining thanks to the environment - a boat in perpetual movement among the waves in the open sea - that envelops everything and holds together in a haptic, spherical and rotating vision for which the fish-eye of the GoPro plays a decisive role. This fluid chaos is spherified by the film whose two-dimensional structure, with a beginning and an end, holds together the fluid mass of the filmed world³. Seagulls become fish (from min. 60.75), air becomes water and vice versa, starfish floating in the dark sea look like stars in the sky, men, fish, birds, machines, tools and objects are all intertwined in a fluid and apparently chaotic codependence that the film spheres.

If to understand *Leviathan* we limit ourselves to using the oculocentric category of observation, we could say that in *Leviathan* the GoPros produce a sort of panopticon, a transcendental eye, the so-called "Eye of God" that observes everything. We will recall that the metaphor of the Eye of God was used to describe the gaze of Hollywood cinema that allowed the viewer to be omnipresent (it is in every scene) and omniscient (he/she knows what the characters in the film do not know). But in *Leviathan* the Eye of God is also able to touch the skin of the fishermen and immerse themselves in the water, to use a haptic gaze that returns, even through sounds, the tactile sensations.

We can consider *Leviathan* as an attempt to participate in the sensory materiality of reality, going beyond the material boundaries of the body, merging the body with water, wind and everything that "surrounds" it, whilst entering the fishermen's bodies to capture emotions, feelings and sensations from within. In *Leviathan* the metaphor of the Eye of God is replaced here with that of the 'Body of God', not only omnipresent, but also omnisensorial.

This visual chaos, which is not disorder, could find its meaning thanks to the long shot of the man who falls asleep in front of the television where they are broadcasting a program on fishing. From this

² Although Scott MacDonald wrote "The SEL films are less information- based documentaries than contributions to a contemplative representation of place" (MacDonald 2019: 451), I proposed *contemplation* - already in 2007 - as an interpretive key of MacDougall's films (Marano 2007: 123-124). He explicitly then developed such a contemplative approach in his more recent films as *Under the Palace Wall* (2014, 53 min.).

³ The spherification is a culinary technique consisting of enclosing a liquid inside a thin solid film shaped as a sphere. See for further details: <https://www.italiangourmet.it/sferificazione-tecnica/>

perspective, the film appears, as Stevenson and Kohn wrote, a dream or a nightmare in which all the living beings depicted in the film are the protagonists. A nightmare into which the viewer is sucked into.

Leviathan tests all the criteria with which we usually look at a classic ethnographic film of observation, and we do not easily find answers to the questions we usually ask ourselves about such films: whose gaze is it? What's the movie about? What do you want to communicate to us? What are the social contexts from which fishermen come? What do they think of their work? What are their feelings and emotions? Why don't we hear their voices? The film risks making us fall asleep, as Hunter Snyder (2015) observes, if we resist its attempt to involve us in the abyss of its sound and visual world, or to irritate and annoy us by making us renounce placing it in the "ethnographic" genre.

The aesthetic pleasure that we expect from a written or visual ethnography derives from the pleasure of reflexivity and knowledge, of the discovery of meanings under the guidance of an author who makes us empathize with the point of view of the natives. In short, this is an enjoyment that starts first from the mind and the eye, through the spectator / reader ability to position him/herself in another point of view by making it his/her own - from which to observe reality by living a subjectivated experience - and whose enjoyment lies in the discovery of a different vision of the world: the empathic exploration of people different from us, their unveiling of meanings.

But if it is impossible to apply a point of view - especially in the desubjectivated (disembodied) shots to which we are unable to attribute a body that lives them - we feel that sense of disorientation and distance that in the worst case becomes annoyance and irritation. The viewer is unable to be hosted by anyone's body because he does not identify the subject of the gaze. It is in fact through the gaze that the shot offers us, that we are able to project ourselves into the body of a subject of the film, author or protagonist. This appropriation of vision becomes possible only if in a film we are able to identify, to give a body to the subject of that gaze. *Leviathan* ignores the spectator's need for a point of view, yet offers a coherent vision that does not consist in stitching together shots of fragments of reality from a certain point of view, but in "blending" them and immersing the spectator inside them

To define this spectatorial condition, the notion of immersivity has spread so much - almost always cited by the authors of VAR - so that we talk about an immersive turn (Rose 2018) referring above all to virtual realities in 360 ° filming. With regards to immersion, Paolo Favero emphasizes the relationship between space, movement and vision based on Gibson's theories, for which "visual perception is built on the stimulation that living organisms experience when they move in space" (Favero 2018: 65). See also Tim Ingold, who criticizes this idea because

It gives rise to a vision of the world as detached from the observer, as a static thing out there waiting to be animated by a human "passerby". In Ingold's words, "the objects of the environment" are revealed as if "the light reflected from their external surfaces [...] reaches the eye of the moving observer" (p. 12). As we can see, Merleau-Ponty's work therefore offers an expansion of this vision capable of looking at the human being as an active part of the world he/she sees. At the same time the perceiver and the producer of the world he/she explores, the observer was for Merleau-Ponty literally entangled in the world. Equally considered as sentient creatures, the observer and the world are here aligned; they are both, to quote Latour (2005), "active" in this exchange. Offering a perspective where the animate and the inanimate, the material and the immaterial, the observer and the observed meet and merge, Merleau-Ponty sees consciousness, the world and the perceiving body as mutually connected beings (Favero 2018: 66).

However, it seems to me that the terms immersion and immersive do not do justice to the profound meaning of the enactive dimension⁴ that the camera produces as - in the words of Jean Rouch - a

⁴ Enaction is the method of self-organization and continuous reorganization of living beings in constant exchange with the environment theorized by Varela, Thompson and Rosch in *The Embodied Mind*. In Eleanor Rosch's introduction to the new 2017 edition - it is impossible to summarize it adequately here - the interactive relationship between mind, body and environment, always interrelated in a dynamic process that temporarily redefines them, is highlighted. Rosch writes: "The lived body, the lived mind and the lived environment are therefore all part of the same process, the process by which one's world is enacted (in phenomenology, it is said, it 'produces a world'). Human beings, of course, can enact Self, boundaries, survival, environment, exchange, desire and aversion in symbolic castles of great subtlety, but this does not change the basic processes" (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 2017: 11). Furthermore, *The Embodied Mind* adopts the Buddhist theory according to which the Self does not exist as a permanent entity, but as a contingent and variable self-perception in the here and now (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991: 71- 72). To explain, even better, what enaction is, we quote the words of Marcello Cini according to

catalyst of reality. Not immersion or immersive because "plunging" or "submerging" - if ekphrasis is important and therefore words make the difference - recall the idea of a solid enclosed in a liquid from which it remains separated while preserving its physical integrity. "Immersion" and "immersive experience" - terms that obviously find easy references in the water world in which the *Leviathan* GoPros sink us - do not precisely collect the lesson of Merleau-Ponty, as they do indicate a total participation albeit in the separateness of bodies. Obviously the film literally recalls immersion because it concerns the marine and submarine environment in which it submerges us. Sound however plays an important role - perhaps not immediately perceptible due to our ocularcentrism that favors the sequence of images separated from each other by editing cuts and only afterwards does it notice the sounds that chase each other and merge. As spectators we follow the camera while the sound accompanies us as a support on which to place the image. The sequence shot of about 7 minutes of the fishermen shelling shellfish (from min. 56.58 to min. 64 approx.) begins with a "classic" shot in which three fishermen are seen mechanically at work with their knives. The camera gets closer and closer, it disrupts their movements and lingers on the details, activating our sense of touch and smell. We touch the scratched skin of those men with our fingers, smell the sweat, smell the salty scent of shellfish. Then the camera blurs, letting the sound emerge occupying our entire sensory field, almost blinding us, disappointing our desire to observe and to know through the gaze, diluting the image in the acoustic landscape. The siren tattooed on a fisherman's arm moves and comes to life adding sensuality to the scene that the background noise of the fishing boat's engines and the foreground sound of the knives opening the shells definitively fluidify.

The continuous dislocation of the point of view and the deconstruction of observation through disembodied, weird and eccentric gazes, as well as bodies in constant motion, distract the shot from its task of enclosing the world. Think for instance of the sequence that begins at minute 50.46, where the GoPro seems to have been placed on the head of a fisherman. The continuous movement of the man prevents us from framing anything, as the very concept of framing vanishes. This happens in almost the whole movie. Plus, Ernst Karel's cleverly mixed sound melts everything around by blurring the editing cuts. All this has nothing to do with the concept of submersibility, perhaps more with the Sartrean concept of viscosity mentioned by Pinney. From my point of view, the most useful concepts to communicate the meaning of what happens in *Leviathan* are those of permeability and solubility to indicate both the non-separateness of the elements present in reality and the possibility of merging into a single fluid entity. While the concept of spherification expresses the work of putting the film into textual form on liquid reality.

However, if we continue to look for answers to questions that *Leviathan* does not actually ask - where is the author? Whose look is it? What's the movie about? What does it mean to us? What are the social contexts from which the protagonists come? What do they think of their work? What are their feelings and emotions? Why don't we hear their voices? - we remain dissatisfied, we do not understand the meaning of the film and we remove it by classifying it as non-ethnographic.

Rather than looking for answers to questions the film doesn't ask, we should find the questions *Leviathan* does. *Leviathan* questions the separability of living beings and the environment, subject and object, sound and image, eye and ear, life and death, culture and nature, production and consumption. *Leviathan* enactively conceives living beings as intimately fused together, not separated from the environment in which they act - knowable in the interactions with everything they encounter, not separated from the mind or from the matter that surrounds them⁵. It expresses this existential enactive

which in the enactive posture the subject "acquires a 'knowledge' of the object of a different nature, because it is no longer an external object, but it becomes a subject 'internal' to a metasystem that includes him/herself together with the object. This involvement induces in him, as an integrated organism of brain and viscera, a set of physical and mental reactions different from those that provoke in him the experience of who describes from the outside how other subjects interact with the objects with which they are in turn involved through intense emotional experiences "(Cini 1999).

⁵ "The body consists of body-environment interaction long before there is a separate body distinct from a separate environment around it. Living bodies and their environment are a much more original interaction, long before perception and sentience (consciousness) develop, so that we perceive a body here separate from an environment there. We are body-environment interactions. Other people are an essential part of the environmental interaction which we are. We live our situations with our bodies. We do a lot more with our bodies than we know about. That is why others can sense what we ourselves don't know in ourselves. Our bodies live directly in our situations. That is why 'focusing' works (Gendlin 2012: 78-79). By 'focusing' Gendlin means the ability,

condition by evoking concepts of *liquidity* (because liquids take the shape of containers), *permeability* (because its boundaries can be crossed), *solubility* (because the body can "dissolve" in interaction, losing the sense of its own boundaries).

Our bodies, made up of about 60% water, are, still using the culinary term, are spherified: they contain liquid inside and are protected from the outside by a film. This film is both biological and cultural: it serves to protect us but is permeable and must be kept in constant balance between inside and outside. We are in fact penetrated not only by other cultures, but also by viruses and bacteria, sometimes we host parasites, we involuntarily ingest insects - we voluntarily cyber our body, we let the deities take possession of us by melting a host in our mouth or during a rite of possession.

The sense of annoyance that gripped me during the first viewing of *Leviathan* was therefore caused not by the film itself, but by the "inappropriate" questions I asked myself. It was a change of perspective that then has allowed me to understand the film in its own terms. So I had to stop wondering which subject the point of view of each shot belonged to or whose experience shown in the film was. I have started to think that perhaps *Leviathan* has allowed me to perceive reality in a dimension that I could not otherwise feel because I was dominated - and with me, for centuries, the whole of Western culture - by a Cartesian model for which reality is a datum external to the knowing subject and consequently distant from his/her body.

At first glance, it seemed to me that the filmmaker's invisibility led the film back to some contemporary, more sophisticated variant of objectifying poetics in an attempt to restore, albeit sensorially, a copy of the world. However, *Leviathan* seemed to recall Jean Rouch's *Les Tambours d'avant*, the first milestone of enactive poetics (Marano 2007)⁶, for his intimate and close conversation with the life present on the fishing boat - here also suggesting a previous preparatory work of construction of the field reports in line with the dictates of ethnography. But on closer inspection, the oscillation between the categories of distance and proximity leads back to a Cartesian and perspective, optical vision of reality. Therefore, the modification of our epistemological posture - in my opinion absolutely necessary to enter the language of *Leviathan* - involves a revision of numerous categories so far used in visual anthropology to describe the ethnographic film and the practices of the gaze in general. In *Leviathan*, space and time collapse and the viewer remains disoriented without space-time coordinates. But what we call "disorientation", to indicate a negative feeling, can here be converted into a request for repositioning. The viewer - together with the filmmakers - by renouncing an optical gaze that wants to see and control everything, and by putting the phenomenon into perspective with a point of view and a vanishing point, he/she becomes soluble, melting into reality together with all other living beings featured in the film. Emblematic in this sense is the scene of the shower (min. 46:49 - 48:12), preceded by a sinking of the boat in the water and followed by a submerged vision of the watery world, where the man's body dissolves in the steam of the hot water.

From a systemic approach, *Leviathan* is an extremely realistic expression of our permeability, of our out-of-body and interdependent presence in the world. It is a "description" - here I use quotation marks because the term would not appeal to the authors of *Leviathan* - of what our senses perceive if we remove both the eye of its power at the top of our sense hierarchy and the subjectivity as the ontological foundation of cognition.

Leviathan could be considered as an attempt to implement that phenomenological and systemic theoretical position proposed by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch in the book *The Embodied Mind* (1991). In particular, the authors take from Buddhism the idea that there is no permanent self, asking themselves 'if there is no Self, what makes our lives coherent?' "How come, if we don't have a Self, that we continue to think, feel and act as if we have a Self, continually trying to enhance and defend that unavailable, inexperienced Self?" (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991: 110). Dependent origin (codependent arising), or the dependence of each phenomenon on factors and conditions of different origins, denies and at the same time replaces the idea of a Self that holds everything together. The authors of *The Embodied Mind* embrace this concept: "we will use the term codependent origin since this

acquired by a training, to be focused on "the physical quality of right now (expansive, constricted, heavy, jumpy, or no word for it, just ... this quality). The quality changes with each aspect, however large or tiny. If the unique quality actually comes, then further steps come from it. We call this practice 'focusing'" (Idem: 76).

⁶ Objectifying, subjectivated and enactive poetics are the three approaches to reality I here explored.

term well expresses the idea, familiar in the context of the societies of the mind, of transitory but recurrent, emergent properties of the aggregation of elements" (ibidem). The authors of *The Embodied Mind* return several times to the question of the uselessness of the concept of Self if considered a substantial permanent entity, and to the need to find in any case a criterion of consistency in the experiences lived by an individual. The solution would lie in the concept of emergency that the authors recover from Buddhism as the codependency of various factors (to put it in a nutshell)⁷.

Only if we look at *Leviathan* from this perspective we do understand the difficulty of bringing him back to a point of view. What it proposes to us is exactly this idea of a Self emerging from the contextual and contingent interdependence of elements that are related.

We cannot overlook the role that technology plays in the representation of the experience that *Leviathan* offers us. GoPros, as we have already said, have a decisive role in their ability to integrate into the body of the filmmaker or of the subjects: they are not prostheses but intraneous devices, or to put it with Benjamin innervated technologies.

On the viewer's side, based on what Miriam Bratu Hansen writes, the concept of innervation is linked "to the notion of an optical unconscious familiar to [Benjamin's] essay on the work of art, referring, widely, to a neurophysiological process that mediate between internal and external, psychic and motor, human and mechanical registers" (Bratu Hansen 1999: 313). Freud, Bratu Hansen recalls, "uses innervation more specifically to describe the phenomenon of 'conversion', the transformation of an unbearable, incompatible physical arousal into 'something somatic' [...]. As Buck-Morss says, 'innervation is the term used by Benjamin to indicate a mimetic reception of the external world to enhance it, in contrast to a defensive mimetic adaptation that protects at the price of paralyzing the organism - depriving it of its capacity for imagination and therefore of an active response'. To imagine such an enabling reception of technology it is essential that Benjamin, unlike Freud, would understand innervation as a two-way process - not only a conversion of affective and mental energy into a motor and somatic form, but also the possibility of reconvert and recover the splitting of psychic energy through motor stimulation" (Idem: 316-317). Benjamin, accepting the power of technology and understanding its role in the formation of experience, and rather than rejecting it hoping for a return to an original pre-technological state of nature, recognizes its inevitability in its role of "second nature".

As Bratu Hansen writes,

For Benjamin there is nothing beyond or outside of technology, neither in immanent political practice nor in his visions of messianic reconstitution. There is no way to conceive a restoration of the instinctive power of the senses and their integrity that does not take into account the extent to which the apparatus has already become part of human subjectivity; and there is no strategy to prevent the self-destruction of humanity in which technology does not play a fundamental role. It is because Benjamin so clearly recognizes the irreversibility of the historical process - that second fall that is modernity - that he pursues a 'politicization of art' in terms of a 'collective innervation of technology', rather than a restoration of the sensorium to its natural state instinctively intact. The question is not how to reverse the historical process but how to mobilize it, circulate it and channel its effects (Bratu Hansen 1999: 325).

Benjamin writes: "True, humans as a species have been at the end of their evolution for millennia; but humanity as a species is just at the beginning. In technology, a *physis* is being organized in which its contact with the cosmos will take place in a new and different form than for peoples and families" (Benjamin 2011: 462). As Pinotti and Somaini summarize,

The second technique is based on the ideal of a "combined game" (*Zusammenspiel*) of man and nature, of a "balance" (*Gleichgewicht*) between the human being and the equipment, which finds its theoretically most meaningful culmination in the concept of "innervation" (*Innervation*) - a modality of incorporation by virtue

⁷ Just as any agency emerges from the action of individual agents, so the repetitious patterns of habitual actions emerge from the joint action of the twelve links. And just as the existence of the action of each agent is definable only in relation to the actions of all the others, so the operation of each of the links in the chain of codependent arising is dependent on all of the other links. As in any agency, there is no such thing as a habitual pattern per se except in the operation of the twelve agent motifs, nor is there such a thing as the motifs except in relation to the operation of the entire cyclic system. (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991: 116).

of which the technical medium and the human body cease to be opposed as the artificial to the natural, but mutually integrate each other in a functional prosthetic complex. Its most advanced stage of the field of cultural expression, the cinematographic apparatus offers the human being the possibility of training in new experiential modalities in a real sensory training, which shows performative aspects similar to those of the scientific experiment and sports competition. (Pinotti and Somaini, in Benjamin 2011: 22)

If for Benjamin perception is historically determined, the "second technology" that is innervated - the first for Benjamin is that non-mediated operation present for example in sacrifice - can only become a second nature, as shown by the contemporary intraneity of the tools (mobile phones, GoPros). As such, the same productions made with those tools require a new conceptual baggage and a new epistemological posture.

Obviously a technology can be used in an "old" way without exploiting its potential. However, the products fully realized with these innervated technologies not only in the body of the filmmaker but also in the reality filmed - like *Leviathan* - cannot be considered as documents, descriptions, interpretations or representations. They are, precisely, second experiences, i.e. experiences of a different type in which the audiovisual apparatus does not Cartesianly interpose itself between subject and reality, but is an element of the environment through which such reality reveals itself in its own dimension specific. Therefore, in these cases, we must also abandon the concepts of immediate and mediated. These are experiences that are simply different, and that excite the senses in a different way, requiring specific forms of participation. In fact, how could one imagine the possibility of living a "first" experience of *Leviathan*? There is no semiotic or interpretative relationship between the "second" experience that the film offers us and the "first" experience, or "reality".

The fusion of the camera into the tangle of natural beings presented in the film is also detected by Paolo Favero: "Placed there in the midst of the fish or the sea, the camera is not guided by the intentionality of the filmmaker but rather by the various entanglements with the materiality of the elements that surrounds it. Its movements actually respond to the pressure of water as its flows do to casual encounters with a variety of material objects" (Favero 2018: 90).

In any case, first and second experiences are not unrelated: they interact and feed on each other, forming together a complex environment of information flows, sensations, memories that we can distinguish on the analytic level but which then converge in the provisional construction of the "unique" Self. If therefore this immersive presence is possible and sensorially pregnant, this is probably due to the fact that it belongs to our life.

Technique does not dominate nature, writes Benjamin, rather it dominates the relationship between nature and humanity: "In technology [to nature] a *physis* is being organized in which its contact with the cosmos will take place in a new and different form for peoples and families" (Benjamin 2001: 462). As Pinotti and Somaini write, Benjamin sees cinema as

technical organ which - thanks to the ability of the camera to propose itself as a prosthetic extension of the eye and that of the montage to interact with the space-time coordinates of perception - allows to pursue in the most rigorous way that objective of "innervation" in which one summarizes the aesthetic-political significance of Benjamin's theory of the media [...]. An "innervation" is understood here as a revolutionary project that finds, for Benjamin, the most appropriate ground on which to be experimented in cinema. A training ground of perceptive "exercise" that makes cinema "the object currently most important in that doctrine of perception named aesthetics by the Greeks -, and aesthetics as the core of Benjamin's theory of media (Pinotti and Somaini 2011: 13, in Benjamin 2011)

If then *Leviathan* does not describe a phenomenon; if it refuses to dominate it, to control it by framing it from a point of view; or if he does not want to explain and interpret it - this does not mean that it renounces to observing and hearing it. Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious⁸ still works, but it is

⁸ If it is quite usual for a man to realize, for example, the pace of people, albeit in bulk, he/she certainly knows nothing of their demeanor in the fraction of a second in which "the pace is lengthened". Photography, thanks to its accessory tools such as slow motion and enlargements, is able to show it to him/her. Photography reveals this optical unconscious to him/her, just as psychoanalysis does with the drive unconscious (Benjamin, The work of art ...)

reductive. *Leviathan* shows us not so much things that we could not see without technology - the optical unconscious - but rather makes us feel that deep connections between apparently separate objects. *Leviathan*, as I wrote, allows us to perceive the systemic and enactive dimension of reality, the autopoietic work of life, the intertwining of interactions that would otherwise escape us if we did not adopt a new cognitive posture. And this is *Leviathan's* fundamental change of perspective - more than the optical unconscious it reveals to us an ontological unconscious - making us feel ourselves and all the things "around" with which we are in existential contact. It brings out the ontological systemic essence of the world in all of its interdependent materiality and sensoriality and draws us inside making us feel - not showing us - the interdependent and autopoietic ontological nature of life, by breaking the embedded Cartesianism that prevents us from perceiving the profound reality.

If *Leviathan* is difficult for anthropology to handle, this is because it escapes the traditional categories used to classify an ethnographic film: observation, documentation, social analysis, native point of view - to mention the main ones. But reversing the perspective, we could ask ourselves if it is not anthropology that rather has to extend its field of action, or to re-elaborates it in the light of ecosystemic phenomenology - rather than ousting *Leviathan* from its enclosure. It is also true that Tim Ingold's theoretical proposals with their emphasis on relationality favor an understanding of this type of film. As Ingold writes:

Reality itself, we can now say, is relational at every level [...] The key factor is the idea that relationships, as they unfold, continually generate the beings they bind. In anthropological jargon, 'beings-in-relationships' are 'mutually constituted'. To put it more simply, the relationships we have with others enter within us, making us what we are. And they act the same way in others too. So, when we connect with others - and at the same time try to differentiate ourselves from them - these two mechanisms of union and differentiation act from within. Beings do not so much interact as they do intra-act. That is, they are inside the action. (Ingold 2020: 86)

Based, like Ingold, on the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and James Gibson (1966), Bruno Latour and Philippe Descola are also contributing to a new enactive perspective. They are theorizing an ontological turn (for a summary see Mancuso 2016) which reacts to postmodern culturalism with a renewed holism aimed at finding, especially on Descola's part, an "order of orders" with a Levi Straussian flavor, based on agency and recognition of subject to all living beings. At the base of these epistemological changes there are also the aforementioned theories of Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991) on which Descola builds his theoretical framework.

If we embrace the solicitations coming from the ontological and relational turning point, *Leviathan* become then more "digestible" for the more conservative anthropology, because it is in the context of this new vision of the world that it is placed.

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