

The contemplative style in the ethnographic documentary between observation and immersion

Abstract: The author draws the field of a documentary style he calls “contemplative” essentially based on long shots, long takes, limited montage and absence of dialogues. The precursor signs of this style are indicated by Marano in the observational cinema, particularly in some of David MacDougall’s films, and then continued in the production of anthropological documentary filmmakers at Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab. The enunciative modes of the contemplative style do not lead back to contemplation as an activity of the mind, but are a rhetorical strategy to overcome oculo-centrism, give way to the other senses and convert contemplation to immersion.

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Since the beginning of this century several documentary films labeled as “ethnographic” presented the use of long shots, long takes, limited montage and absence of dialogues. I already located the tracks of that style in some of MacDougall’s films, calling it *contemplative* (Marano 2007). In the case of the Australian scholar and filmmaker, it has roots in the “fly on the wall” version of *observational film*, a term that “has been applied to a range of different documentary film-making practices, some of which are based on mutually contradictory principles and strategies” (Henley 2004: 109). Beyond the documentary genre, a wider interest for this style is also referred to as *slow or floating aesthetics* (Martin 2021; Straughan, Bissell and Gorman-Murray 2022). In the case of Mark Cousins’s films this is traced back to the Japanese cinema (Martin 2021)¹.

The term “cinema of slowness” - or “slow cinema” - dates back to 2003 with the work of the French critic Michel Ciment. As de Luca states, “it has since been widely used to refer to films characterized by measured pace, minimalist mise-en-scène, opaque and laconic narratives, and an adherence to the long take as a self-reflexive stylistic device. Filmmakers such as Béla Tarr (Hungary), Lav Diaz (Philippines), Carlos Reygadas (Mexico), Tsai Ming Liang (Taiwan), Lisandro Alonso (Argentina), and Abbas Kiarostami (Iran), among others, are often cited and studied as exemplary of this trend. At the same time, the style has been the subject of heated and polarized debates in film criticism. Accordingly it gained momentum in academia with the publication of several books on the subject. To date, it is fair to say that slow cinema is a fully fledged concept with its own detractors and advocates, the former condemning its ossified, apolitical, and ‘made for festivals’ style, and the latter praising its measured tempo and artistic depth” (de Luca 2016: 24).

¹ “Moreover, there are wider traditions of Japanese aesthetics that I wish to locate Cousins’s work within. Cousins’s films share the slow pace and contemplative tone that Donald Richie suggests as emblematic of Japanese cinema (2011: 183). Indeed, Cousins has recently attempted to revise conventional thinking in cinema studies by arguing that the work of the celebrated Japanese film-maker whose films embody such qualities of contemplation – Yasujiro Ozu – should be considered as ‘a conceptual centre of film aesthetics’, more so than the films of the classic age of Hollywood (2011: 129). The characteristics of Japanese cinema derive from older indigenous literary traditions, and Cousins demonstrates a similar approach to story-telling within his work to these much older narrative traditions (Richie 2011). Cousins has himself recorded how its theatrical roots influenced the pronounced role of the narrator in Japanese cinema (2011: 40–41), and it is tempting to view his own uses of voiceover as a contemporary updating of the *benshi* tradition of pedagogical narrators in early Japanese cinema (Goodwin, 1994); certainly, his films switch narrators within scenes, provide commentary on the *mise en scene* and encourage the films to float seemingly free from dramatic arcs” (Martin 2021: 2).

In the case of MacDougall I noted that the contemplative posture was facilitated by the lack of knowledge of the local language used by his informers, so the filmmaker was “forced” to frame them until they finished talking. Not being able to understand, MacDougall contemplates the scene in front of the camera. To contemplate “recalls that romantic attitude of observation, for example of nature to find the invisible bonds among earthly and supernatural things - the *latu sensu*, particular and universal. The terms ‘to contemplate’ and ‘contemplation’ come from the Latin terms *contemplari* and *contemplatio*, both deriving from *templum* - the limited space for bird flight observation for augural purposes. Therefore *templum* is the cut-out ground or sky perimeter from which (or inside which) it could observe the flight of the birds to predict the future according to a practice of Etruscan origin. To limit the attention, framing the rectangle where the filmed subjects and objects are enclosed, it is a way to wait for the sense as it would naturally surface. Hence the feeling of immobility. The MacDougall frame — like the *templum* from which we watch the flight of birds to get premonitions — is placed in front of the viewer, letting him/her hold on to something as it will happen. The meaning will arise by itself, frame by frame” (Marano 2007: 123-125). This observative attitude has been differently interpreted by Antonio Marazzi as “a particular sensitivity to listening”, as an observative detachment which becomes tactful and it blends with a sense of empathy felt by the viewer” (Marazzi 2002: 118).

Etienne Souriau reminds us that the term *contemplatio* formerly indicated “an active and practical aptitude [...] an accurate attention”. Due to the mystic-philosophical influences, it then acquired characteristics related to mysticism and passivity - a sort of “semi-ecstasy with a passive abandonment to the object” (Souriau 1961: 182).

Dudley describes the relation between observation and contemplation (θεωρία) by the following word, which analyzes the way Aristotle used the term θεωρία: “the original meaning of θεωρία is ‘to watch’. We can see the particular meaning of ‘watching’ (θεωρία) at the theater or in a religious festival. In *Protreptico*, Aristotle compares the contemplation of the universe to that of one of the spectators in the spectacle” (Dudley 1982: 388-389). In brief, the meaning of contemplation swings between philosophy and theology, between ‘to contemplate as to know’ and ‘to contemplate as to meditate’, as well as between the rational and the irrational.

Contemplation as a way of shooting can not then relate to the philosophical and theological thought. The contemplative gaze appears in fact more as a type of observation, a term tuned on anthropology – even if sometimes the film shows us the reality as an object on which to meditate.

The contemplative style should be analyzed crossing practice and the enunciative structure. On the one hand there is the perceptual experience of the audience, on the other hand, the film as a text. Indeed Fagard states: “to what extent contemplation is to be characterized as a structural element in moving images or rather as an attitude of the spectator?”. Also Tiago de Luca faces the issue by the spectatorial perspective highlighting the importance of big screens and suitable places to watch this kind of films. He states that slow cinema “brings about a renewed awareness of temporality and the opportunity to imagine different worlds by soliciting a mode of spectatorship that reflects on its own phenomenology as a collective act of physical coexistence and lived experience in time” (de Luca 2016: 42).

In other words, is contemplation an activity of the filmmaker during shooting or of the viewer during the screening? Or both? And how?

Refusing a fast and expressive montage, contemplative documentaries focused on particular and unfamiliar places require a “sustained and patient cinematic attention — indeed, of a kind of salvage ethnography. On a formal level, these films were reactions to the acceleration of commercial media during the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and the increasing overload of images per minute

in commercials and commercial movies — as well as to the implicit training in hysterical consumption provided by this acceleration. The place- focused avant- garde films and the films of the Sensory Ethnography Lab filmmakers, are about slowing down to see and hear — and to consider — where we are” (MacDonald 2019: 451).

We can find direct references to a contemplative vision between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The 1896 catalog of Vitascope Company suggested the projection of a film, often of few seconds length, between four and ten minutes in loop. “This did more than de-narrativize individual films: such sustained presentations also encouraged spectators to contemplate and explore the image. As this evidence suggests, one way that early audiences were meant to look at films was not unrelated to the way they were meant to look at paintings [...] Numerous films would seem to allow for, even encourage a state of contemplative absorption” (Musser 2006: 162).

Often the one shot movies showed landscapes or city views that the audience was used to observing as a painting in a contemplative state of gazing. Still nowadays we find this kind of landscape changing imperceptibly in the films of many documentary filmmakers mentioned here. Of course the cinema of the origins was directly influenced by other media like painting and photography, and it found its specificity along the time.

The cinema of contemplation did not exclude the cinema of attraction that amazed the audience for its technological originality rather than the story - as *L'arrivée d'un Train en Gare de La Ciotat* (Lumière, 1897).

Referring to Diderot and Fried, Gunning “generally associates early cinema with a third spectatorial position – that in which the filmed subject plays to and acknowledges the beholder” (Musser 2006: 169).

The first [spectatorial position] constructs the beholder as absent (“the fiction that no one is standing before the canvas”), while in the second the beholder metaphorically enters the world of the painting (“the fiction of physically entering a painting”), which is to say that the beholder crosses over from his/her space into the world of the painting (or the film). Other early films that seemed designed for the viewer to enter the world of the film would include phantom rides where the spectator is drawn into a space by the camera placed in a vehicle moving through or into space. The train effect is also based on this second presumption – the viewer enters the world only to be chased back out [...] Cinema of attractions, writes Gunning, is a cinema of astonishment that supplies ‘pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself’. A cinema of contemplation likewise involves scenes, each of which is “of interest in itself.” (Musser 2006: 169-170).

The term “contemplative style” was already used referring to Andrej Tarkovskij, Abbas Kiarostami and Terrence Malick movies. Rossouw writes about Malick: “his contemplative style draws the viewer into a reciprocating posture of philosophical contemplation” (Rossouw 2017: 285). In the case of Kiarostami, Alberto Elena states that in the film *Five*, the director “makes an appeal for a kind of audiovisual detoxification [...] His is a radical call for a contemplative cinema that should not, however, be understood as a mere passive recording of reality, but rather as an investigation that sculpts in light and time” (quoted in MacDonald 2019: 209).

Scott MacDonald use the term “contemplative” to indicate a documentary style particularly present in the works of the filmmakers trained at the Sensory Ethnography Lab of the University of Harvard².

In SEL films no narrator presumes to provide information, explanations, or conclusions— and they abandon interviews for immersive sensorial

2 “The Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) is an experimental laboratory that promotes innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography. It uses analog and digital media, installation, and performance, to explore the aesthetics and ontology of the natural and unnatural world. Harnessing perspectives drawn from the arts, the social and natural sciences, and the humanities, SEL encourages attention to the many dimensions of the world, both animate and inanimate, that may only with difficulty, if it all, be rendered with words. The SEL is directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor. The work produced through SEL in film, video, photography, phonography, and installation has been presented in universities and academic conferences across the world. It has also been exhibited at the Venice Biennale, documenta, the Whitney Biennial, MoMA, British Museum, Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou, the Berlin Kunsthalle, London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts, Shanghai Biennale, Aichi Triennale, PS1, MASS MoCA, MAMM Medellin, and the Whitechapel Gallery. Films and videos produced in SEL have been selected for Berlin, Locarno, New York, Toronto, Venice, and other film festivals” (<https://sel.fas.harvard.edu/>).

3 The objectifying poetics include those films which basically claim to produce objective representations of reality. They capture and freeze in a film pieces of an ephemeral reality making them available to the scholar who analyzes them as if they were faithful copies of the filmed event (Marano 2007: 170-173).

4 *Untitled* (2010, 14 min.): "A revealing one-shot portrait of two Nepali newlyweds in a moment of rest and playful interaction, Stephanie Spray's *Untitled* challenges our perception of two themes at the very core of ethnographic filmmaking: human relationships and the ways in which they can be experienced by the viewer. Only fourteen minutes long, *Untitled* is uncut, rejecting the implications of edited sequences and also purposefully excluding subtitles over the couple's conversation. The style of the film confronts the history of ethnography as a controversial study of the "other" by refusing us any clear messages or meanings behind what is being presented, challenging the viewer to come up with their own answers to any questions that may arise" (<https://dafilms.com/film/9295-untitled>).

engagement with and within the worlds portrayed. The SEL films are less information-based documentaries than contributions to a contemplative representation of place. Cityscapes, landscapes, in all their complex variations and imbrications, have become a modern cine- tradition exemplified, in American cinema, by the films of Larry Gottheim, Peter Hutton, and perhaps most of all by James Benning and Sharon Lockhart, all of which involve sustained contemplations of particular environments, often in shots of extended duration (MacDonald 2019: 451).

The contemplative style is essentially based on the long duration of the frame, the immobility of the camera or slow long sequence shots. They seem to suggest a back to the objectifying poetics³, but the filmmakers did not have this positivist purpose. They swing between the attempt to bring back the phenomenological experience of the filmed event - as in *Leviathan* (Castaing-Taylor, Paravel 2012) - and the intensification of the acoustic and visual experience of a single part of event/space/time - as in the Sniadecki film.

Long shots, sequence shots made with a steadicam, are the modes through which the film shows a reality fully sensorial whilst at the same time giving back to the spectator their own gaze on it. The immobility of a frame temporally long permits to both filmmaker and viewer a gaze that examines and watches everything. It gives them the time to explore the image in the mode of observation and at the same time to emplace them in the framed space of life. But there is a threshold of saturation of the sight (the observation) beyond which the gaze has nothing more to look at but micro-variations. The visual perception gives then way to the other senses, especially hearing, in a gradual immersion in the framed environment.

With regards to the sound, Verena Paravel says:

When I approach a subject - people, a place - I am constantly interrogating myself about how to access it on multiple levels. And to be sure, acoustic connections are as important for me, as alive in my mind, as vibrant in my body, as those we deem exclusively visual. There are as many acoustic protrusions to a person or a place that one can attach oneself to cinematically, as there are visual or tactile protrusions (cited in MacDonald 2019: 469).

And J. P. Sniadecki:

Sound has an allure all of its own, and in all projects I am equally focused on sound and image. Sound-making (and recording) is also place-making, because sound both flows from and floods into bodies and environments, forming a kind of sonic orientation and meaning (cited in MacDonald 2019: 470).

The long duration of the shots makes time perceptible. Stephanie Spray states:

An additional and implied subject in these three films, and maybe all my work, has been time itself, about how its texture varies as it unfolds in the moving image and in our lives, which is one reason why I have kept my shots relatively long. Of course, much of this is an intellectual explanation of what is simpler in practice. I am frequently motivated by the joy of experiencing the world through the camera, or what Jean Rouch called cine-trance, which I think is most evident in *Untitled*⁴. I love how the frame allows me to reorder and direct experience, opening up new possibilities for knowing. Using the camera as an extension of the body in this way is physically challenging, at times exhausting, but also exhilarating. (cited in MacDonald 2019: 465-466).

Referring to the filmmaking of *7 Queens* (2008)⁵, Verena Paravel notes: “The camera and I were perhaps the catalyst for such craziness, and at times I felt like all the excess and insanity I was witnessing was beginning to inhabit me too” (MacDonald 2019: 468). The perception of being inside of the filmed world as an inseparable part of it, is clear to Verena Paravel: “I respond to the world when I’m filming, much as I do when doing ethnographic fieldwork: I surrender to it body and soul. It colonizes my whole being, which takes a huge toll on me, but is also what makes both filming and fieldwork, at their best, so fulfilling. My life ends up conjoining with the lives of my subjects, and in the process I end up confronting myself and all my anxieties and obsessions at the same time as I confront the world outside me” (MacDonald 2019: 469).

Libbie Dina Cohn - co author with J. P. Sniadecki of *People’s Park* (2012)⁶, a long sequence shot of 78 minutes length among the people of Chengdu’s urban park - remembers her surprise to feel: “how immersive the filming process was. There were moments when our coordination was seamless, and I’d enter a kind of meditative hypnosis, channeling my attention into the scenes and movement around us, via the little camcorder frame”. And Sniadecki adds: “Cine-trance!” (MacDonald 2019: 478).

It seems the filmmaker’s cine-trance turns into contemplation on the side of the viewer and extending temporally itself it possesses and takes them to immerse in the sensible interconnected substance of the frame. Maybe this is what MacDougall calls a “spiritual synchrony” (MacDougall 2006: 28).

The process of progressive fall in trance – or immersion – of the viewer begins with the scanning of the frame/image up to saturation point beyond which the sound, until then in the background, begins to become the protagonist occupying the perceptual activity of the viewer. This process is particularly evident in *El Mar La Mar* (2017, 95 min.)⁷ by Joshua Bonnette and J. P. Sniadecki. This film offers to the viewer long length shooting by still camera showing long shots with barely perceptible movements of the water or leaves blowing in the wind. Other frames are black, letting the viewer’s attention be focused on the voice over.

The focus on the *soundscape* originates from a general attention to the *sensescape* and the recent success of soundscape studies. This is also the influence on SEL of Ernst Karel, sound ethnographer and sound artist who has contributed to several films produced within the Laboratory (Henley 2020: 423). The words of Paravel e Stephanie Spray help us to give a sense to the long shots in the SEL films. They suggest another interpretive lead which brings us beyond the contemplation and which resound in the answer MacDougall gives to the question: why the filmmaker wants to describe and show events through a film?

Is it an affirmation of the thing itself, or of one’s own vision, or a desire to command the consciousness of others? Or is it perhaps to transcend oneself, to overflow one’s self-containment? [...] For many filmmakers there is an ecstatic, even erotic pleasure in filming others [...] The filmmaker ‘makes’ nothing in an obvious sense but conducts an activity in conjunction with the living world. The pleasure of filming erodes the boundaries between filmmaker and subject, between the bodies filmmakers see and the images they make. Filming is fundamentally acquisitive in ‘incorporating’ the bodies of others [...] In achieving this, the bodies of the subject, the filmmaker and the viewer become interconnected and in some ways undifferentiated [...] This results partly from the synchrony that Hoffman and Rouch both note, and from an internal mimicry of the other person’s gestures, postures, voice, and emotional states [...] This becomes a spiritual synchrony, perhaps best expressed in Marshall’s words: *It’s happening. I’m on* (MacDougall 2006: 27-28).

If we refer to spirituality to mean the feeling of interconnection among subjects and objects in the filmed environment – as very well expressed by

⁵ *7 Queens*: “Recorded during an aimless extended (anti)-ethnographic walk beneath the elevated tracks of the #7 subway lines in NYC, *7 Queens* wander in the fragile zone of fleeting relations. Through a series of spontaneous interactions, this piece experiment with boundaries and physical thresholds, and captures evanescent forms of intimacy through random, and sometimes aborted encounters” (<https://sel.fas.harvard.edu/7-queens>),

⁶ *People’s Park*: “A 78-minute single shot documentary that immerses viewers in an unbroken journey through a famous urban park in Chengdu, Sichuan Province. The film explores the dozens of moods, rhythms, and pockets of performance coexisting in tight proximity within the park’s prismatic social space, capturing waltzing couples, mighty sycamores, karaoke singers, and buzzing cicadas in lush 5.1 surround sound. A sensory meditation on cinematic time and space, *People’s Park* offers a fresh gaze at public interaction, leisure and self-expression in China. The film, which premiered at the 2012 Locarno International Film Festival and had its US premiere at the New Directors/New Films festival at the MoMA in New York, is the winner of the 2012 “Best Anthropological Film” at Festival dei Popoli, “Best Cinematography” at the Ann Arbor Film Festival, and “Cinema Guerilla” Award at the Lima International Film Festival. It has also screened at the Vancouver International Film Festival, the Viennale, DocLisboa, Mar de Plata, Toronto Reel Asian Film Festival, RIDM, Edinburgh International Film Festival, Cinema du Reel, It’s All True Documentary Film Festival, Riviera Maya International Film Festival, Lima Independent Film Festival, and the Munich International Film Festival, among others. Acquired by San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for its perma-

ment collection. Co-directed with Libbie Cohn". (http://www.jpsniadecki.net/s/CV_Sniadecki_Jan2016_NU_2.docx)

7 *El Mar La Mar*: "The sun beats down mercilessly on all those who cross the Sonoran Desert between Mexico and the United States. Aside from the few people who live here, it's the poorest of undocumented immigrants that make the crossing, who have no choice but to take this extremely dangerous route, followed by border guards both official and self-appointed. The horizon seems endlessly far away and deadly dangers lurk everywhere. It's best to move under the cover of darkness; during the day, being exposed to the heat and sun is enough to make animals and humans perish. Their traces and remains accumulate, fade, decompose and become inscribed into the topography of the landscape, making the absent ever-present as life and death, beauty and dread, hostile light and nights aglitter with stars and promise all continue to exist alongside one another. El mar la mar masterfully weaves together sublime 16-mm shots of nature and weather phenomena, animals, people and the tracks they leave behind with a polyphonic soundtrack, creating a cinematographic exploration of the desert habitat, a multi-faceted panorama of a highly politicized stretch of land, a film poem that conjures up the ocean". (<https://dafilms.com/film/11220-el-mar-la-mar>).

8 We can see MacDougall's contemplative style in his film *Tempus de Baristas* (1993) but also in some long sequences of *A Wife among Wives* (1981).

9 È in quella occasione che Rouch sperimentò per la prima volta la ciné-trance (Henley 2020)

MacDougall –, we are reducing the effect of immersion to something immaterial. I am not sure that the immersion in the images does not produce sensations of tact, smell and touch. Some immersionist people in virtual realities like Second Life told me they can feel the scent of the person they are interacting with, how she/he dresses and some details of the room. If we accept the enactive perspective, and we think we are able to augment our reality through the images, we can sense the possibility to feel sensorially the image in which we are connected - perceiving that world beyond the skin which contains our body.

For the filmmakers there is the pleasure of filming, to know sensorially, to extend the experience of the world immersing themselves in an unfamiliar reality. In MacDougall's words there is a break toward the enactive poetics that films like *Leviathan* by Lucien Castaing Taylor and Verena Paravel, and *El Mar La Mar* by Joshua Bonnetta and J. P. Sniadecki stand for. The enaction comes to surface from MacDougall when he uses sayings like "an activity in conjunction with the living world", "the filmmaker and the viewer become interconnected and in some ways undifferentiated", "spiritual synchrony".

These new filmmaking styles, contemplative and immersive seem – except the case of David Macdougall – practiced by the filmmakers without a full epistemological awareness rooted in Bourdieu, Varela and Merleau-Ponty theories. They reap the fruits of Rouch and MacDougall⁸ labor, the first one as a pioneer of the immersive style, the second one as the initiator of the contemplative style. For instance the immersive and hypnotic status ("meditative hypnosis") experienced by Sniadecki during the shooting of the long sequence shot of *People's Park* (2012) among the people in the urban park of Chengdu recalls the ciné-trance experienced by Jean Rouch in the film *Le Tambours d'avant* (1971)⁹, whereas *Untitled* (2010) by Verena Paravel, *Manakamana* (2013) by Stephanie Spray and *Songhua* (2007) by J. P. Sniadecki appear more close to the observational cinema, the contemplative style of MacDougall and Robert Gardner's poetic.

The thin border which separates contemplative and immersive style is visible in *Leviathan* where immersivity is produced by the GoPro cameras tuned on the movements of the filmmaker's and boat's bodies. Contemplation is practiced in the long shot of the snoozing sailor in front of the TV screen. In this last long frame screened on a big screen, the contemplative gaze of the viewer is gradually transformed into an immersive status – we can't anymore use the term "gaze" for that because the immersive status is more a condition of the body than of the sight. Both Taylor-Paravel and Sniadecki "are immersed in the world of their subjects through a use of the camera that seems to defy and transcend the framing that surrounds their images" (MacDougall 2019: 75).

Unger states:

Each long take - as an uninterrupted block of real time in relation to screen time - allows (or forces) the viewer from a limited camera perspective to contemplate the content, rather than the context, of each shot, because the viewer can pay attention to whatever element of the mise-en-scène she or he wishes at any given moment, which thus adds to the sense of verisimilitude to the images [...] The slow pacing of the film, with each shot ranging from two to five minutes of uninterrupted time and space, amplifies the sensorial aspect of the film, allowing the audience to settle within the world of the film, and yet highlights the minimalistic structural aspect of the film itself. *Leviathan's* embodied camera approach, though different in technique, shares a concern for the interspace between filmmaker and subject that is similar to Leonard Retel Helmrich's "single-shot cinema" technique in which the constant movement of the camera running continuously in a long take evokes a more intimate or immersive experience of filming the event (Unger 2017: 9)

These developments of the observational film - between contemplation and immersion but without participation in the collaborative sense of the term - seem in tune with the anthropological turns in anthropology and the enactivist approach to phenomenology (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991). “Also prominent in SEL discourse – Henley states – are references to the ‘flux of life’, ‘life-worlds’, lived experience’, ‘the magnitude of human experience’ and other similar phrases, all of which are allusions to the ideas of philosophers in the phenomenological tradition - particularly Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty [...] - to assert the 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).

The border between contemplation and immersion could be very tiny and faded. Contemplation and immersion can overlap and coexist in the same film, both basically based on observation. Comparing *Leviathan* and *Sweetgrass* we could say that the first one is immersive and the second one is contemplative, but Christian Suhr and Rane Willerslev states that *Sweetgrass* “immerses us in the day-to-day world of sheepherders in the high mountain pastures of Montana. With no voiceover, everyday conversation (and diatribes), and a soundtrack of remarkable, intensified presence, the film is far more immersive and experiential than informational or conceptual. It contributes something else, something film language makes possible to a degree written language does not” (Suhr e Willerslev 2012: 298).

The twine of body, mind, emplacement, embodiment, senses and environment is summarized in these Kelvin Low’s words:

Howes (2005: 7) proposes that if embodiment suggests an interconnection between body and mind, it follows that the paradigm of emplacement would then point to a ‘sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment’. The interest arising from these theoretical underpinnings therefore lies in conducting ‘phenomenological investigations into the sensory constructions of space’ (Rawes, 2008: 62) in the city [...] This brings us back to phenomenological principles where the body as a research tool (Longhurst et al., 2008; Mears, 2013) therefore emplaces the researcher in ethnographic contexts (Pink, 2008) in the Merleau-Pontian sense of ‘being-in-the-world’. The notion of sensory emplacement (see Pink, 2009) is therefore paramount as a component of framing what sensory methodologies of urbanity entail. In connection with bodily emplacement and the senses, Pink (2009) proposes that given the body as an agent of experience and knowledge, it is thus integral to the production of a sensory ethnography (Low 2015: 299-300).

The ethnographer or the filmmaker should not be forced to choose among observation, contemplation and immersion. She/he can locate the emplacement at just one of these levels, but she/he can also traverse all of them to describe the reality from each of those placements and to relate the results. If writing would adopt these styles of description, it should experiment new forms of language, new tropes to express sensations and emotions to overcome the hiatus between the materiality of the fieldwork and the immateriality of the words that evokes the dualism body (the researcher’s body)/ mind (the interpretation or cultural translation as a mind activity) the enactive phenomenology wants to cross and the mentioned films try to practice.

But the filmmaking contemplative style is not easily acceptable by mainstream anthropology almost because of the absence of dialogues and in many cases the lack of a fieldwork and participant observation before the shooting. Hemley states: “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). In fact the contemplative and immersive films do not show any relationship between the filmmaker and the subjects, neglecting the participation as one of the fundamental principles of the fieldwork, that in many cases could transform itself into collaboration entailing the share of the research scopes in order to produce social improvement (Elder 1995; Gruber 2016).

However, it would be understood if the filmmaking had adopted an intense relational activity before, during and after the shooting, as a tool of construction of empathy and involvement. If that had happened, if they had an intense relational activity, I wonder why the filmmakers who want dialogue with the community of mainstream anthropology could not find a way to leave a trace of those interactions?

On the other side, in mainstream and “traditional” anthropology, should anthropologists accept word-less ethnographies as those based on dialogue, interpretation and writing as tools of narration/description. Can there be a word-less ethnography? If not, why should we accept an ethnography without images and sounds?

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Filmography

Ilisa Barbash Lucien Castaing-Taylor
Sweetgrass (2009, 103min)

David MacDougall
A wife among wives (1981, 72 min.)
To Live with herds (1972, 90 min.)
Tempus de baristas (1993, 143 min.)
Under the Palace Wall, (2014, 53 min.)

J. P. Sniadecki
Songhua (2007, 28 min.)
People's Park (2012, 75 min.)

Joshua Bonnetta e J. P. Sniadecki
El Mar La Mar (2017, 95 min.)

Verena Paravel
7 Queens (2009, 22 in.)

Stephanie Spray
Untitled (2010, 14 min.)
Manakamana (2013, 120 min.)

Lucien Castaing Taylor e Verena Paravel
Leviathan (2012, 87 min.)