

# A DOCUMENTARY LIKE NO OTHER?

HARVARD'S SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHY LAB,  
EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE & THE ART OF NON-FICTION  
FILM

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds

School of Languages, Cultures and Societies  
Centre for World Cinemas and Digital Cultures

July 2017





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Approximate word count: 82,000

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the help and support of a number of people. First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Diana Holmes and Dr Vlad Strukov, for their invaluable support in guiding me through this process, and for their insightful discussions of my work, their careful proof reading, their career advice, and their friendship and good humour. I also owe them a particular debt of gratitude for tolerating—and helping to alleviate—my near constant self-doubt over the years. I am of course also enormously grateful to the Arts & Humanities Research Council for funding my PhD. Without this financial support I quite simply would never have been able to undertake this project. I would also like to thank Professor John Corner for his advice and guidance during the early stages of my project, and Professor David MacDougall for reading an early draft of my work and offering advice and encouragement at a time when I needed it most. Karen Priestley also deserves a special mention for helping me to navigate through the administrative minefield that accompanies postgraduate research, and for answering all of the many questions I had along the way. In my final year I was also particularly buoyed up by the company of the resident postgraduate students in B01 and B02 of the Michael Sadler building. They provided me with the sort of companionship, support, empathy and understanding that only a fellow PhD student can offer (to say nothing of the coffee, cake and biscuits).

I would also like to extend my deepest thanks to Jeff Silva for being the most welcoming, gracious, friendly, and well connected host I could possibly have asked for during my three month research visit to Harvard University in the winter of 2014. My time there would have been infinitely less enjoyable without his friendship, and far less productive without him to introduce me to the vibrant documentary and experimental film community in and around Cambridge. I also would like to thank the staff at the Harvard Film Archive, particularly Brittany Gravely, who went above and beyond the call of duty in helping me to arrange my visit. Thanks also to Liz Coffey for arranging screenings of some of the films discussed in this thesis for me, and to Dennis Lim for generously allowing me to sit in on the film screenings for the ‘Art of the Real’ module he was teaching at the university at the time. Thanks also to Arine Kirstein Høgel for her friendship during my time in Cambridge, for the stimulating conversations about documentary film, and for her help and

collaboration in arranging a public screening at the Carpenter Center of some of Robert Gardner's work. Arine and I, along with the SEL's Ernst Karel, also had the enormous privilege of being invited by Gardner's partner, Dr. Adele Pressman, to her house in Cambridge where she shared stories about her late husband with us over dinner. This experience alone would have been enough to make my visit to Cambridge extraordinarily memorable, and I would like to take this opportunity to extend a very warm thank you to Dr. Pressman for this great privilege, and for her generosity and hospitality.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their unwavering patience and support over the years—this process would have been a lot harder, and a lot less fun, without Oliver, James and Asa in particular. Wendy Cook also deserves a special mention, for the hours of meandering discussions of the latest releases we've had over the years in her tiny office at the Hyde Park Picture House, but also for being more supportive of my academic pursuits than any person could ever reasonably expect of their boss. I also owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my Mum and Dad for always being there to support me, both financially and emotionally. But perhaps more importantly, I want to thank them both for instilling in me the life-long desire to learn that led me down this path. And last but by no means least, Joanna. You are a constant source of inspiration to me and I couldn't have done this without you.

# ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship between cinematic techniques and forms of knowledge in the non-fiction film. The purpose of many documentary films is to convey knowledge about the world to the viewer. But the degree of emphasis on this function varies enormously from film to film.<sup>1</sup> The kind of knowledge that a documentary provides also shifts depending on what formal strategies it employs. The films produced by Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL), claimed by some commentators to represent a radical new form of documentary filmmaking, often eschew the epistemic and didactic function that is often associated with the documentary in favour of providing a more immediate, intimate and sensuous representation of particular locales and environments. Their emphasis on the material, physical, affective and sensuous qualities of lived experience suggests that SEL filmmakers are interested in conveying a different kind of knowledge, one that cannot be reduced to words or easily communicated with propositional statements. This thesis contributes to and expands upon existing scholarship on the relationship between film form and knowledge production and transmission, and counters the discourse of newness that has surrounded the SEL, by analysing the relationship between the cinematic techniques and ways of knowing of a number of important precursors to two of the lab's key works: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash's *Sweetgrass* (2009) and Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel's *Leviathan* (2012). Finally, this thesis provides new analyses of these two SEL films, informed by this historical overview. It argues that the different ideas about the epistemological function of the moving image embodied in the earlier filmmaking activity have fed into the philosophy and praxis of these two films. Finally, the study concludes that the kind of knowledge that *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* convey can be thought of as an 'embodied knowledge', and it argues that it is through the use of what Laura Marks calls 'haptic' audiovisual strategies that these films are able to convey this kind of knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Except where the context requires greater precision, in this thesis the word 'film' is used to describe all material produced and distributed using traditional photochemical film technology, as well as that produced or distributed using digital or analogue video.

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# INTRODUCTION

Movements and styles come and go. What is exciting initially soon becomes commonplace and exhausted, and other innovations are in order [...] The challenge is to invent and improvise new twists to old styles, not for their own sake, but as you wrestle with and respond to your subject. Documentary is on an impossible and unending quest to depict the depth of life as it is actually lived. Life will always run away from our films, and exceed our grasp, but the task, however vain, is to run after it again.

- Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking* (1997: 33)

Implicit in a camera style is a theory of knowledge.

- David MacDougall, 'Unprivileged Camera Style' (1982: 9)

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In this Introduction I outline the methodological approach, scope and rationale of this thesis, and discuss a number of key issues within documentary studies and visual anthropology that have informed this study. **Section 1** of this introduction deals primarily with methodology and scope. In **section 2** I situate my work on the Sensory Ethnography Lab within the context of previous scholarship on the lab, and further clarify the rationale behind this thesis. In **section 3** I describe the relationship between the different disciplines that this thesis engages with, as well as addressing the problem of definition surrounding terminology related to these disciplines. Here I rehearse a number of possible definitions for the terms 'documentary film', 'visual anthropology', and 'ethnographic film' and then address the ways in which I understand and use these terms. I also use this section to highlight one of the key underlying themes of this thesis: the invigorating potential of hybridity, and cross-fertilisation between disciplines and forms of artistic practice. In this section I also begin to explore the close link between cinematic techniques and knowledge within non-fiction film. Finally, in **section 4**, I provide a brief account of the 'sensory turn' that has occurred over the past several decades within the humanities and social sciences. This turn towards the senses as both an object of study and a means of inquiry has had a major impact on the key issues that this thesis is concerned with. Furthermore, the theoretical framework through which I approach my filmic analysis in later chapters belongs squarely within this broad intellectual current, so this section also



serves to further clarify this study's methodology and rationale. I conclude this introduction with a summary of the thesis and an outline of its structure.

\*\*\*

## 1. RATIONALE, METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

This study takes an interdisciplinary approach that draws on a range of sources from within and outside of film theory. These include documentary studies, visual anthropology, cultural anthropology, epistemology, phenomenology, and experimental film. My argument has been influenced by ideas within visual anthropology regarding the communicative, and multi-sensory, potential of audiovisual media. Anthropological research into embodiment and bodily 'ways of knowing' also underpins my contentions. In the final chapter I bring these ideas into a dialogue with film theorist Laura Marks' concept of a 'haptic visibility' (Marks, 1998; 2000). Marks' work is informed by phenomenology and theories of embodied spectatorship, as well as the aforementioned anthropological research into the relationship between culture, knowledge, the body and the senses. The principal methodological framework through which this study addresses its key concerns is a qualitative and interpretative one. Each chapter is built around one or more case studies that draw attention to important technical, aesthetic, ideological and epistemological concerns within documentary and ethnographic film. Specific examples of films are studied in depth. This close analysis is conducted based on the assumption that a film's representational strategies and cinematic techniques reflect the underlying epistemological and ideological assumptions of its maker(s). Attention is also paid to each film's historical context, as well as the discourse surrounding it. The case studies I explore have been chosen because each represents a different conceptualisation of the relationship between film and knowledge production and transmission.

The other major unifying thread that connects each of the case studies in the first four chapters of this thesis is my contention that they all influenced, whether directly or indirectly, the philosophy and aesthetic of two important works by filmmakers associated with the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL). This thesis provides new analyses of these two works: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash's *Sweetgrass* (2009) and Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel's *Leviathan* (2012). The

analyses of these two films, conducted in the final chapter, are informed by both Marks' notion of 'haptic visuality' and the historical overview and analysis contained in the preceding chapters. It is not my intention to provide a complete 'anatomy' of documentary film in relation to these two key SEL films, but rather, to analyse and explore the connective tissue of a particular kind of non-fiction film. My aim is to provide an account of key moments in the history of non-fiction film that have contributed to shifts in the way filmmakers have conceived of the relationship between film and knowledge. There are of course countless films that were screened for Sensory Ethnography students that had an impact on each filmmaker personally, and whose influence can be felt in their work. Many of these are mentioned by SEL filmmakers in the interviews Scott MacDonald conducted for his book *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary & Avant-Garde Cinema* (2015).<sup>1</sup> Here though, I am primarily interested in demonstrating how the work of SEL filmmakers—specifically Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Ilisa Barbash and Véréna Paravel—is connected to earlier currents within documentary cinema in terms of the development and evolution of ideas about the epistemological function of moving images.

The films I have chosen to focus on in the first four chapters of this thesis are largely canonical works that, although not widely known outside of the specialist domains of documentary studies and visual anthropology, have received considerable attention within these fields. Although this could be construed as a limitation in terms of the originality of this study, the novel theoretical perspective around which the analysis of these films rests throws new light on to this work. This study also draws attention to previously under acknowledged connections and points of intersection between the films I explore in a way that is valuable for future theorising. Perhaps as a result of my decision to focus largely on canonical works from documentary history, this study focuses overwhelmingly on a group of Western, white, male filmmakers. A number of women filmmakers do feature in this study—including Margaret Mead, Judith MacDougall, Ilisa Barbash and Véréna Paravel—but the main figures I focus on are John Grierson and his acolytes (who were predominantly male, white and middle- or upper-class), Jean Rouch, David MacDougall, Robert Gardner, Stan Brakhage, and Lucien Castaing-Taylor. Future avenues for further research into the relationship between cinematic techniques and knowledge within the non-fiction film might, for instance, include the work of the great many women, black and ethnic minority, and non-Western

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the films mentioned by SEL filmmakers in these interviews, a list of some of the films that have

filmmakers who have made contributions to the development of the documentary film at least as significant as the contributions of these men. Furthermore, the decision to focus on the work of a group of predominantly white men, often working across cultural and social divides, also brings up important questions related to the ethics of representation. Many of the works discussed in this thesis provide ample material for a postcolonial critique in particular. This study does draw attention to the problematic ethical and moral dimensions raised by the films I discuss, but my focus here is primarily on questions of aesthetics and epistemology, namely, the relationship between film form and the production and transmission of different kinds of knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

What is knowledge? What counts as knowledge? What can we know? What does it mean to know something? And how do we know what we know? These questions are central to the branch of philosophy known as epistemology (also sometimes referred to as the ‘theory of knowledge’). Although the principal aim of this thesis is to contribute to an interdisciplinary dialogue between film studies and visual anthropology, both fields draw on concepts from epistemology and therefore this thesis does too. However, I am concerned with exploring the relationship between cinematic techniques, knowledge and ways of knowing as broadly understood within these fields specifically. Knowledge is of course at the very heart of both the anthropological project and the documentary project. Many documentaries stimulate what Bill Nichols calls an ‘epistophilia’ in their audiences (Nichols, 1991: 178). That is to say, a desire to know and a pleasure in knowing about the real world. But as I will demonstrate in **section 3.1.2.**, not every documentary or ethnographic film evinces the same conception of knowledge, nor seeks to convey the same kind of knowledge to the viewer.

This thesis draws and expands upon the work of a number of theorists and practitioners whose work sits at the intersection between film studies and visual anthropology. For instance, the individuals associated with the SEL—notably Castaing-Taylor, but also Ilisa Barbash and J.P. Sniadecki, amongst others—engage with both the practice and theory of ethnographic/documentary filmmaking and I draw on some of their work here.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the theoretical writing of these SEL filmmakers themselves, another writer whose work has been

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<sup>2</sup> For a more thorough critique of documentary and ethnographic film from a postcolonial perspective, the work of Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996) is invaluable. Brian Winston’s work (2008) also offers a powerful critique of the problematic ethical dimensions of the work of John Grierson and the British documentary movement.

<sup>3</sup> This situation is common within non-fiction cinema. As Bill Nichols notes, a strong link between production and study has been a defining characteristic of much documentary filmmaking (Nichols, 2010: xviii).

integral to the development of my ideas is Anna Grimshaw. In *The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Modern Anthropology* (2001) and *Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life* (2009) (co-authored with Amanda Ravetz) Grimshaw explores, with great lucidity, the relationship between cinematic techniques and epistemological inquiry. Additionally, the work of David MacDougall is another important point of reference. MacDougall is a key figure within ethnographic filmmaking who has been at the forefront of a number of significant formal and conceptual developments within the field. With films such as *To Live With Herds* (1972) and *The Wedding Camels* (1980) MacDougall, along with his wife Judith, helped to pioneer a subjective and reflexive observational approach to ethnographic filmmaking that was to prove enormously influential. The approach of *To Live With Herds* is echoed in the work of the SEL, not least within Castaing-Taylor and Barbash's *Sweetgrass*.<sup>4</sup> I discuss the MacDougalls' work, and *To Live With Herds* specifically, in Chapter 3 of this thesis. As well as being an accomplished filmmaker, David MacDougall is also a thoughtful theorist and historian of documentary and ethnographic film. His key publications include *Transcultural Cinema* (1998) and *Film, Ethnography & the Senses: The Corporeal Image* (2006). In *Film Ethnography and the Senses*, MacDougall champions an approach to visual anthropology that echoes the SEL's own philosophy: he argues that a possible productive future for visual anthropology is for it to clearly distinguish itself from the written discipline through the use of filmmaking strategies that stress the medium's affinity for representing the corporeal, temporal and multi-sensory aspects of lived experience (MacDougall, 2006: 264-274). MacDougall has argued that film's experiential properties allow it to offer a different mode of understanding to the written word, and a distinct way of knowing (MacDougall, 1998; 2006). My work draws on MacDougall's ideas about film's capacity to convey this kind of 'experiential knowledge' and I explore his position with regards to this issue in more detail in **section 3.2**.

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<sup>4</sup> The significance of David MacDougall's work to my project is further underlined by his connection with Harvard University, and with the Sensory Ethnography Lab's founder and current director, Lucien Castaing-Taylor. Castaing-Taylor edited and provided an introduction for MacDougall's *Transcultural Cinema* (1998), and alongside completing an undergraduate degree at Harvard, MacDougall was the 2009-10 recipient of the Robert Fulton Fellowship at Harvard's Film Study Center. During his time there he also taught classes at the University.

## 1.1. An Avant-Doc Community

In addition to the academic and theoretical influences outlined above, the argument that I advance in this thesis is also partly a reflection of my own brief engagement with the SEL and the documentary filmmaking community that surrounds it in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 2014 I spent three months as a visiting researcher at Harvard University. Whilst there I was hosted by Jeff Silva, a documentary filmmaker and film programmer who co-taught the Sensory Ethnography programme with Lucien Castaing-Taylor from 2006 to 2010. During my visit I was able to view key SEL works as well as many of the other ethnographic and documentary films that I discuss in this thesis. I was also, with Silva as a gracious host and a knowledgeable and well-connected guide, able to participate fully in the film community that surrounds the lab. As Scott MacDonald demonstrates in *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn* (2013a), Cambridge has for a long time been an important epicentre for the production of non-fiction film. Outside of the film screenings and pedagogic activity within the institutional boundaries of Harvard itself, the wider Cambridge and Boston area has a vibrant independent film culture. This includes a range of art-house cinemas, screening series and film societies that regularly show work that sits at the intersections of ethnographic film, documentary, and the avant-garde—a kind of liminal territory that MacDonald calls the ‘Avant-Doc’ (2015). For instance, for the past forty years filmmaker and programmer Saul Levine has run ‘Film Society’ at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Film Society is one of the longest running ‘microcinemas’ in the US, and every week they screen independent, alternative, and experimental cinema from around the world. Meanwhile, Silva himself established the ‘Balagan Film Series’ with fellow filmmaker Alla Kovgan in 2000. ‘Balagan’ also showcases ‘offbeat’ audiovisual work that runs the gamut from avant-garde to documentary. All of this activity makes for an exciting and stimulating environment for filmmakers and cineastes. Even beyond the theoretical and practical instruction they receive within the institutional framework of the university then, SEL students are positioned in a unique environment that encourages them to think about the enormous range of creative possibilities afforded by audiovisual media. Significantly, it also encourages them to think about the arbitrary nature of disciplinary and generic boundaries—and to think of documentary in particular as an artful, experimental, creative, hybrid form. My exposure to this environment played a crucial role in formulating my position within this thesis with regards to the way in which the SEL’s engagement with film form and

knowledge has been shaped by a wide variety of different cinematic influences. In the following section I explore the hybrid and boundary crossing nature of SEL work further. Firstly though, I describe the development of the SEL and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's position within the lab, situate this study within the context of previous scholarship on the SEL and further clarify the rationale behind this thesis.

## 2. THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHY LAB

Founded by the anthropologist and filmmaker Lucien Castaing-Taylor in 2006, the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts provides an academic and institutional context for the production of audio-visual works that 'take as their subject the bodily praxis and affective fabric of human and animal existence' (SEL, 2016). Instigated as a collaboration between the Anthropology department and the department of Visual and Environmental Studies (VES) at Harvard, the SEL is housed administratively between the two, and it provides training and support for graduate students, mostly from anthropology, in the production of works of film, video, sound and 'hypermedia.'

This interdisciplinary institutional context has a significant impact on the approach to filmmaking that is advocated there. In an interview with Scott MacDonald, Castaing-Taylor described this approach, and the purpose of the lab, as follows:

Juxtaposing perspectives from the sciences, the arts, and the humanities, the aim of the Sensory Ethnography Lab is to support innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography, especially with work conducted through audio-visual media [...] that are at an angle to dominant conventions in anthropology, documentary, and art practice. (MacDonald, 2015: 401)

For Castaing-Taylor, one of the benefits of this juxtaposition of perspectives is that it stimulates new ways of thinking about and approaching old problems. In another interview, he notes how 'conceptually and perceptually freeing' it was to have artists as colleagues and collaborators (MacDonald, 2012c). Part of this feeling of freedom, Castaing-Taylor suggests, comes from not being weighed down by the restrictive expectations of traditional anthropological thought and the disciplinary conventions for presenting anthropological knowledge—specifically, the need to convert fieldwork experiences into words. Or as Castaing-Taylor puts it, 'to not be forever hung up

on rendering the whole magnitude of existence and all the vicissitudes of experience as so many iterations of linguified “meaning” was a huge revelation to me’ (MacDonald, 2012c).

But whilst the restrictive conventions of a certain kind of anthropology, and a certain kind of anthropological filmmaking, remain anathema to Castaing-Taylor and many of his SEL colleagues, their approach to filmmaking remains rooted in the methodological and theoretical approaches of the wider discipline.<sup>5</sup> As Castaing-Taylor notes, the SEL ‘takes ethnography seriously. It is not as though you can do ethnography with a two-day, fly-by-night visit somewhere’ (Castaing-Taylor quoted in Lim, 2012). The SEL also takes ‘sensory’ seriously, and its activity sits firmly within a current of methodological approaches in both written and visual anthropology, explored in more detail in **section 4** of this Introduction, that ‘insist on the crucial role of the body and the senses, the visceral and the palpable in any engagement with and representation of the world’ (Leimbacher, 2014). This approach to filmmaking—which remains rooted in the practice of sustained research and long-term ethnographic observation, whilst paying close attention to physical environments and to the texture of lived experience—first began to coalesce during the making of *Sweetgrass*.

*Sweetgrass*, which documents the herding of thousands of sheep to pastures in a mountain range in Montana, began as a project that was instigated before the establishment of the Sensory Ethnography program at Harvard; production on the film began while Castaing-Taylor and Barbash were still at the University of Colorado, where they taught film and anthropology from 1998 to 2003. During the making of *Sweetgrass*, Barbash and Castaing-Taylor fully immersed themselves in the world of sheep ranching. They educated themselves about the history of the domestication of sheep, the communities involved in sheep ranching (both in general and in terms of the specific instance of North American sheep ranching shown in the film), and the geography and history of the physical environment in which the events depicted in the film unfold (MacDonald, 2013a: 318). As MacDonald notes, this research is not reported in the film, but it is, as he suggests, ‘subtly evident within the action of the film’ (MacDonald, 2013a: 318). After the pair moved to Harvard, the final shape of the film was strongly influenced by an open and collaborative process in which Castaing-Taylor screened various rough versions of the film to his new colleagues and students at

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<sup>5</sup> As Castaing-Taylor remarks, ‘The Sensory Ethnography Lab [...] reflects the particular culture of anthropology at Harvard, and the non-canonical literary sensibilities and philosophical inclination of many of my anthropology colleagues. Not to mention the intellectual provocations of the grad students’ (MacDonald, 2015: 283-284).

the university (MacDonald, 2013a: 328). As MacDonald suggests, not only was this process crucial in helping the filmmakers to find a ‘satisfactory final form’ for the film, but it also helped to open up a ‘new avenue for aspiring filmmakers interested in documenting the ways in which human beings function within their environments’ (MacDonald, 2013a: 328).

The approach to filmmaking suggested by *Sweetgrass* was ‘institutionalised’ as Castaing-Taylor began to develop and teach the Sensory Ethnography program at Harvard in 2006, and it has been absorbed by the students who have taken the program (MacDonald, 2013a: 328). There is of course enormous diversity and variety of approach amongst the works produced by SEL students, and although, as MacDonald notes, the approach Castaing-Taylor and Barbash settled on when making *Sweetgrass* has provided an important touchstone for many SEL filmmakers, it would be an oversimplification to suggest that all SEL work fits within this mould. Indeed, it is worth reiterating at this point that this thesis does not provide a comprehensive account of *all* SEL practice; I am primarily concerned with Lucien Castaing-Taylor’s work, and in Chapter 5 I focus specifically on *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*, exploring these two key SEL films as specific examples of the particular approach to filmmaking that Castaing-Taylor—in concert with various important collaborators and colleagues—has developed and promoted with the context of the SEL.

## 2.1. *Leviathan* and *Sweetgrass*: Critical Context

Work produced by the Sensory Ethnography Lab has garnered a significant amount of critical attention since the program’s inception in 2006. The vast majority of this commentary has focused on *Leviathan*, their most commercially and critically successful film to date, and the film which arguably represents the apotheosis of the lab’s filmmaking philosophy. Many analyses of *Leviathan* emphasise the film’s multi-sensory qualities. It has been described as an ‘immersive’, ‘utterly physical’, ‘visceral’ and ‘embodied’ cinematic experience (MacDonald, 2012b; Hoare, 2013; Snyder, 2013; Davie, 2013). ‘Red fish flesh, and a warm orange shower inside the belly of the vessel’, writes Hunter Snyder in his review of the film for the journal *Visual Anthropology Review*, ‘thrusts us violently into a visceral corporeality of living bodies’ (Snyder, 2013: 178). ‘Blood, guts, eyeballs, waves, boots, steel, and wood; the film [is] a striking collage of elements’ writes another critic (Ebiri, 2014).



This emphasis on the acutely tactile, material and corporeal nature of the images we see in *Leviathan* is often accompanied by the suggestion that the film somehow gets us closer to the experience of being there, as if we the audience watching the film are actually on the fishing vessel with the crew and the filmmakers. Scott MacDonald (MacDonald, 2012b) for instance, argues that we as viewers experience the fishermen's labour and this particular environment in an almost unmediated fashion. For MacDonald, *Leviathan* places the viewer inside the experiences of the filmmakers and the fishermen, 'as they and we are rocked to and fro' (MacDonald, 2012b). What all of these commentaries on the film neglect to do though, is analyse precisely how *Leviathan's* audiovisual strategies might be achieving this immersive effect.

This understanding of the film as 'immersive' though, has been called into question by some commentators. The most critical appraisal of this emphasis on embodiment and immersion in analyses of SEL work appeared in a special issue of the journal *Visual Anthropology Review* dedicated to the film. In one of the articles from that issue, '*Leviathan* and the Experience of Sensory Ethnography' (Pavsek, 2015), Christopher Pavsek interrogates the discourse surrounding *Leviathan*, probing what he calls the 'presuppositions and theoretical assertions about experience, spectatorship and embodiment' that mark the film and critical responses to it, and beginning 'to call into question some of the claims about the seemingly immersive experience the film offers as well as its ability to supplant contemporary documentary and ethnography by way of a fuller rendering of the sensory encounter with the profilmic world' (Pavsek, 2015: 5). Pavsek suggests that many commentators have blindly accepted Castaing-Taylor and Paravel's own interpretations and framing of the work. '*Leviathan's* reviewers have accepted quite eagerly its claims along these [immersive] lines', he writes, 'seldom calling into doubt the capacities of *Leviathan* or sensory ethnography more broadly to convey embodied or affective experience' (Pavsek, 2015: 5).

Another common thread amongst analyses of *Leviathan* is the suggestion that it represents a formally radical and apparently unprecedented new mode of documentary filmmaking. It has been described as a 'nonfiction game-changer' (Greene, 2013) and a film that 'look[s] and sound[s] like no other documentary in memory' (Lim, 2012). But while the films being produced under the aegis of the SEL undoubtedly signal an exciting moment in the history of non-fiction film, their

‘innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography’ (SEL, 2016) are by no means without precedent. As I will demonstrate in this thesis, breathless pronouncements about the SEL as a site of rupture and novelty elide the continuity that exists between the philosophy and aesthetic of the lab’s work and the formal strategies and methodologies—and the epistemological questions raised by these strategies—of earlier documentary and ethnographic film.

Pavsek’s article addresses this issue of continuity with historical practices, arguing that the ‘newness’ of a film like *Leviathan* ‘depends, in part, on a broader historical forgetting of what cinema has done before’ (Pavsek, 2015: 7). Likewise, in the same issue of *Visual Anthropology Review*, Christopher Pinney draws attention to two of the lab’s most significant cinematic precursors. He suggests that ‘*Leviathan* is Robert Gardner’s practice fused with David MacDougall’s philosophy and enormously magnified through the lens of a technical miracle’ (Pinney, 2015: 39). Ohad Landesman’s analysis of the film also pushes back against this discourse of ‘rupture and newness’ (Landesman, 2015: 17). In ‘Here, There, and Everywhere: *Leviathan* and the Digital Future of Observational Ethnography’ (2015) Landesman responds to the way *Leviathan* has often been framed by critics as something wholly unprecedented within the realms of cinema. In counterpoint to this, his article explores *Leviathan*’s continuities with other modes of representation in ethnographic filmmaking. He suggests that through its use of digital technologies the film ‘extends the contours’ of a tradition of observational filmmaking within ethnographic film that has its roots in the technological and formal innovations of the Direct Cinema movement of the 1960s (Landesman, 2015: 12). He argues that *Leviathan* is a ‘noteworthy maturation’ of the observational cinema tradition (Landesman, 2015: 12). Ultimately he suggests that the film’s principal innovation lies in its deployment of new digital technologies that ‘create new conditions of visibility and listening’ for participatory/observational cinema (Landesman, 2015: 12). Pavsek, Pinney and Landesman all attempt in some way to counter the ‘historical forgetting’ that Pavsek identifies as a feature of commentaries on *Leviathan* (Pavsek, 2015: 7). Landesman and Pinney see *Leviathan* as a continuation of a particular tradition of observational filmmaking within visual anthropology, while Pavsek draws attention to a number of *Leviathan*’s other precursors, notably the work of the British Documentary Movement, and John Grierson’s *Granton Trawler* (1934).

*Sweetgrass*, like *Leviathan*, draws upon a rich seam of filmmaking activity, from within as well as outside of the disciplinary confines of visual anthropology, and several analyses of the film present fruitful territory from which to expand our understanding of these two films and their relationship to earlier works of ethnographic and documentary film. Scott MacDonald's analysis of *Lucien* positions the film as an instance of patient, carefully constructed observational cinema that extends the possibilities of the form through its emphasis on 'creating an intensified, engaging film experience based on and analogous to [...] the essential elements of the experience of sheep ranching' (MacDonald, 2013a: 317). MacDonald emphasises the centrality of the film's soundtrack in this regard, and notes that *Sweetgrass*'s 'highly experimental use of sound' (MacDonald, 2013a: 320) finds an antecedent in Robert Gardner's work—particularly *Forest of Bliss* (1985). In 'The Bellwether Ewe: Recent Developments in Ethnographic Filmmaking and the Aesthetics of Ethnographic Inquiry' (Grimshaw, 2011) Anna Grimshaw also explores the film's aesthetic experimentation—focusing on the close relationship between aesthetics and anthropological inquiry in *Sweetgrass*. She contends that the vision of ethnographic filmmaking articulated by *Sweetgrass* is one in which the unique properties and the aesthetic possibilities of film are 'no longer to be denied but fully embraced' (Grimshaw, 2011: 249). For Grimshaw, this embrace of the aesthetic is intimately related to epistemological concerns. She argues that *Sweetgrass*, in its 'creative alignment of form and content' offers what she calls an important model for

understanding the ways that the aesthetics of film can be used to reconfigure questions, generating ways of knowing that resist translation but exist in productive tension with other knowledge forms (Grimshaw, 2011: 258).

This model for understanding how the aesthetics of film can generate new ways of knowing that resist translation into other forms of knowledge (such as propositional knowledge) is central to the new analyses of *Leviathan* and *Sweetgrass* that I advance in this thesis. My discussion of these two films in Chapter 5 combines Grimshaw's insight with Laura Marks' concept of 'haptic visuality' in order to more fully account for and explore the cinematic techniques through which both *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* engage with different forms of knowledge. This analysis is further informed by a kind of cinematic archaeology. In the preceding chapters I trace the ways in which filmmakers' conceptions of the relationship between film form and knowledge production and

transmission have shifted and evolved, exploring the relationship, for instance, between early conceptions of the camera as an objective recording device—in which aesthetics were seen as incompatible with anthropological inquiry—and conceptions of the camera as a device for engaging with, and perhaps conveying, sensory experience and embodied knowledge. Crucially, this latter conception of the camera is one in which aesthetics are fundamental to the process.

As well as being heir to the historical filmmaking activity that is highlighted by this critical literature, and which my thesis will explore in greater detail, *Leviathan* and *Sweetgrass* are also the product of a long running debate within visual anthropology and ethnographic film about the relative merits of verbal communication versus visual and non-verbal forms of communication, and between propositional knowledge and a kind of knowledge that is often described as corporeal, embodied or experiential (Leimbacher, 2014). By drawing attention to some of the most significant formal and theoretical precursors to these two films, I aim to demonstrate how shifting and evolving conceptions of the epistemological function of the moving image have, both directly and indirectly, fed into the approaches to filmmaking articulated in *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*. In doing so I am contributing to and expanding our understanding of how SEL work fits into these important and ongoing debates about the communicative and epistemological potential of audio-visual media.

## 2.2. Adopt, Modify and Contest

SEL filmmakers engage with the currents of non-fiction filmmaking I discuss in this thesis through contestation as well as adoption and modification. These strategies are one of the focal points of my investigation. I am particularly interested in the interconnections between different forms of non-fiction filmmaking, and the new forms that arise when filmmakers challenge or blur the boundaries between these different forms. For instance, SEL films share many of the broad aims of anthropologists who have used film and photography to explore and document social and cultural phenomena. But at the same time they actively question and challenge some of the more conservative positions that have been articulated by anthropologists about the ‘correct’ way to use film. The SEL consciously positions itself in opposition to the most prescriptive, and restrictive,

approaches to filmmaking within anthropology.<sup>6</sup> These prescriptive/conservative approaches to ethnographic filmmaking are the principal focus of Chapter 1.

The SEL's oppositional and boundary questioning attitude is apparent in the form and structure of the films themselves, and in the way individuals associated with the lab frame their work in interviews. Jeff Silva, for instance, has described the SEL's intentions as a desire 'to make an impact on all the disciplines of anthropology, documentary film, and art' noting that they want their 'works to engage with but also critique the conventions within these fields and hopefully to foster new dialogues within them' (Pennell, 2008). Meanwhile, SEL alumnus J.P. Sniadecki has described Castaing-Taylor as harbouring a 'critical, maybe even hostile, skepticism toward purported disciplinary and genre boundaries between ethnographic film, documentary, and art' (J.P. Sniadecki in MacDonald, 2013b: 303). This is a position that is also articulated in the lab's institutional discourse: a mission statement on their website notes that the SEL 'opposes the traditions of art that are not deeply infused with the real, those of documentary that are derived from broadcast journalism, and those of visual anthropology that mimic the discursive inclinations of their mother discipline' (SEL, 2016). SEL work pushes at and challenges these traditions—as well as critically and institutionally policed boundaries—but it does so with an awareness of the history and significance of these traditions and boundaries. Immersed in the history and theory of ethnographic film, the students and filmmakers associated with the SEL are uniquely conscious of, and heir to, a rich and complex history of the use of photographic technology within the discipline of anthropology. They are also cognisant of the history of non-fiction film more broadly, as well as fiction and avant-garde cinema too. SEL filmmakers produce work that blurs the boundaries between a number of different and ostensibly distinct categories of filmmaking. This essentially fluid, critical and hybrid character is crucial to my understanding of *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*, and the analysis of these films that I advance in this thesis.

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<sup>6</sup> In a gesture that illustrates the scepticism with which SEL filmmakers engage with the discipline of anthropology, *Leviathan* co-directors Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel have a tendency in interviews—one imagines only half-jokingly—to disown the title of anthropologist, even though they are both trained in the discipline. For instance, in an interview for the website *Twitch Film* (Chang, 2013) Paravel and Castaing-Taylor are asked if they are anthropologists by profession. Paravel replies, 'We used to be', while Castaing-Taylor describes himself and Paravel as 'recovering anthropologists'. Paravel then says, 'We still are. But we're just trying to forget this dark side of us (laughs)'.

The audiovisual works discussed in this study are all documentary, or ‘non-fiction’ films.<sup>7</sup> Many of them also belong to the further category of ethnographic film, which itself sits within the wider academic sub-discipline of visual anthropology. Complicating matters further, visual anthropology is a term that is often used synonymously with ethnographic film. These are not categories with firm and clearly distinguishable boundaries. They are all related in complicated, overlapping, and often fiercely contested ways. These labels—‘documentary’, ‘non-fiction’, ‘ethnographic film’, and ‘visual anthropology’—could all reasonably be applied to the SEL’s filmic output, but none of them fit entirely comfortably. The most interesting and distinctive SEL films draw on, expand and challenge the traditions and histories of each. As Paravel has said of her work with Castaing-Taylor: ‘[It] fits awkwardly within anthropology, awkwardly within art, and awkwardly within cinema’ (Balsom and Peleg, 2016: 42). The following section explores the relationship between the fields named by the terms ‘documentary’, ‘visual anthropology’, and ‘ethnographic film’. It suggests that the boundaries that terms like these delimit, however arbitrary, help to shape filmmaking practice. It outlines some of the ways in which these elastic terms have previously been defined, and explains the way they are understood and used in this thesis. In addition to this, it also begins to highlight the relationship between cinematic techniques and knowledge within the practices named by these terms, and signposts a number of other key issues and theoretical concerns that will be explored in more detail in subsequent chapters.

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<sup>7</sup> The term ‘non-fiction’ is often used as a synonym for documentary film—as in the title of Erik Barnouw’s historical overview of the form, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (1993). In this usage it functions as an umbrella term covering all filmmaking practices with an avowed investment in the real world, naming any film ‘where there is a basis in the world of actuality’ (Ward, 2012: 7). Unless otherwise stated, in this thesis I will follow this convention. ‘Non-fiction film’ does also have a second and more specialised meaning though. In this second sense the term refers to ‘raw’ unedited footage of actual events that have not yet been shaped into a documentary ‘proper’. A ‘non-fiction film’ in this sense includes everything from the Zapruder footage of the assassination of JFK, and the video of the police beating of Rodney King, to the early actualities filmed by the Lumière Brothers. To this list we could also add the more recent images of police brutality predominantly recorded by bystanders on mobile phones in the United States. These are films that have a ‘clear indexical link to a pro-filmic world—a world that “happens” irrespective of whether the camera is present—and they appear to simply “show” or record the events they depict’ (Ward, 2012: 8). Questions of context and intentionality are central to distinctions between ‘non-fiction’ and ‘documentary’. What distinguishes a non-fiction film from a documentary in this understanding of the term is that in a non-fiction film there is no perspective, argument or voice that provides ‘structure and meaning’ (Bruzzi, 2006: 27). As Ward clarifies further, in this understanding of non-fiction film ‘all documentary films are nonfictional, but not all nonfictional films are documentaries’ (Ward, 2012: 7).

### 3. BLURRED FIELDS OF VISION: DOCUMENTARY, VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY & ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM

Documentary, ethnographic film and visual anthropology all have their own histories, with their own distinct theoretical and methodological debates. But they are also all fundamentally related. At a basic level they are united by the common bond of a shared interest and investment in the historical real and the domain of lived experience. As a result of this common bond, they share many of the same intellectual, ethical, practical and aesthetic concerns. Similarly, each is also—to varying degrees—a contested term with no universally agreed definition. This makes describing the relationship that exists between them with any real precision somewhat difficult. Ethnographic film for instance, lies particularly uneasily within this broad territory. As Eliot Weinberger notes, depending on your perspective, ethnographic film is ‘either a sub-genre of the documentary or a specialised branch of anthropology, and it teems with contention at the margins of both’ (Weinberger, 1992: 24-25). Similarly, documentary has been described as a ‘fuzzy concept’ with ‘blurred boundaries’ (Nichols, 1991; 1994a), while anthropology itself is an interdisciplinary pursuit that muddies clear cut distinctions between different fields of intellectual inquiry. As Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby remind us, it has always concerned itself with subject matters—economics, politics, biology and so on—that other disciplines consider to be theirs (Banks and Ruby, 2011: 12). Visual anthropology in particular is especially prone to this kind of cross-border fertilisation (Banks and Ruby, 2011: 12).

Boundaries between categories of artistic or intellectual activity are of course not absolute. They are not physical, tangible phenomena, but primarily intellectual constructs. They are given shape in the discourse that frames a discipline or activity—within universities and cultural institutions, at conferences, in popular and academic writing, and on message boards and email chains. In the case of films, categories and boundaries are suggested in the form and content of the works themselves. Certain tropes and commonalities may be identifiable, which are then articulated by critics, theorists and audiences to suggest ways in which these films may be grouped together. This kind of categorising is, as Bill Nichols suggests, ‘seldom a purely objective act in which we follow the natural fault lines given to us by a preexisting world’ (Nichols, 2010: 143). And, as Nichols notes, while it may be possible for the physical sciences to classify in this way, these natural fault lines quickly

disappear when what we want to classify is ‘the product of our own human activity’ (Nichols, 2010: 143).

However, the contingent and constructed nature of these boundaries does not detract from their power as frameworks that frequently set the terms of debate and influence the kind of activity that is deemed appropriate or proper—or whether a particular work is deemed a ‘success’. In other words, these frameworks often have tangible, real-world consequences. Ideas about what exactly constitutes an ethnographic film or a documentary may, for instance, be used to decide whether a particular film receives money from a funding body or institution; whether it is included on a university course; or if it receives attention from a particular publication. This in turn shapes the development of the kind of filmmaking in question. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 1 and Chapter 4, this has been especially true of ethnographic film. Although I wish to avoid getting too bogged down in the quagmire surrounding the issue of definition that has been a feature of both documentary studies and ethnographic film, part of my argument in this thesis depends on understanding the impact that these boundaries have had on the kind of films that get made. It is also dependent on understanding how different forms of filmmaking cross-fertilise with and influence one another. In order for both of these aspects of my work to be clear it will be necessary at the outset to first understand how these boundaries and borders have commonly been delimited. The working definitions offered at this point also act as a useful starting point for a discussion of key issues and theoretical concerns associated with the fields named by these elastic terms.

### 3.1. Documentary Film

The term ‘documentary’ has not been as fiercely contested as ‘ethnographic film’, but a considerable amount of energy has nevertheless been expended on the question of definition within the branch of film studies concerned with the form. It was a central preoccupation of many of the seminal contributions to documentary studies in the 1990s. These works asked: what exactly is a documentary? And, perhaps more importantly, is it possible to clearly distinguish the documentary from other forms of filmmaking? If so, how might one go about doing this? Alongside the issue of definition, documentary studies has typically also been concerned with a number of other key questions. These revolve around the complex relationship between reality and artifice (between the



real world and its ‘creative interpretation’ in a documentary); the authenticity or otherwise of particular aesthetic devices and filmic techniques; documentary’s purpose or function; and the ethics of representation and the responsibility of the documentary maker to her subject(s).<sup>8</sup> These issues are all broached to some degree at various points within this thesis, but in this section I focus principally on the question of definition. Ultimately I want to suggest—as the editors of the recent collection *Documentary Across Disciplines* (2016) do—that what is more important than deciding which deployments of the slippery term ‘documentary’ are correct or incorrect, is to think about the documentary tradition as fluid and hybrid—one that is shot through with ‘uncertainty, contamination and contestation’ (Balsom and Peleg, 2016: 18).

The simplest definitions of the documentary are often based around its relationship to reality, and its ostensible distinction from the fiction film. A documentary in these terms is any film that depicts ‘real’ people and ‘real’ events. Bill Nichols for instance—a film theorist and critic who played a crucial role in developing the contemporary field of documentary studies—suggests that unlike the fiction film, the documentary addresses ‘*the* world in which we live rather than *a* world imagined by the filmmaker’ (Nichols, 2010, xi, emphasis in original). Similarly, Paul Ward writes that ‘unlike the fictional mode, where places and characters may be completely fabricated, the nonfictional is a realm where there is a basis in the world of actuality. This seems straightforward enough—fiction is “made up”, nonfiction is “real”’ (Ward, 2012: 7). But as both writers go on to note, there are numerous examples in which this seemingly straightforward distinction between fiction and non-fiction starts to break down. There are, as Ward suggests, ‘countless nuances and points on the spectrum that suggest that this relationship is more fraught than it first appears’ (Ward, 2012: 7).

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<sup>8</sup> After an initial burst of interest in the form in the 1930s—including the theoretical writings of John Grierson (collected in Hardy, 1966; Grierson, 1998c) and *Documentary Film* (1935), Paul Rotha’s seminal early history of the form—the documentary received relatively little scholarly attention until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning in the 1970s, a new resurgence of interest in documentary film saw the publication of a number of historical overviews of the form, including Erik Barnouw’s *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (1974), Richard Barsam’s *Non-Fiction Film: A Critical History* (1973) and Jack C. Ellis’ *The Documentary Idea* (1989). These were followed by a wave of significant theoretical works in the 1990s that firmly established documentary studies as a distinct field within film studies. Bill Nichols’ *Representing Reality* (1991) and Michael Renov’s *Theorizing Documentary* (1993) both played a key role at this stage in the development of the burgeoning field. These texts focused principally on establishing what exactly distinguishes the documentary from other forms of filmmaking, particularly the fiction film. Other significant works of documentary scholarship include: *New Challenges for Documentary Film* (Rosenthal, 1988); *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (Rabinowitz, 1994); *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (Winston, 1995); *The Art of Record: A Critical Introduction to the Documentary* (Corner, 1996); *Imagining Reality* (Cousins and Macdonald, 2006); *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (Plantinga, 1997); *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Gaines and Renov, 1999); *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (Bruzzi, 2000); and Betsy McLane’s updated version of Ellis’ book, *A New History of Documentary Film* (Ellis and McLane, 2005).

Even Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922)—a film often considered the 'urtext' of documentary film—made extensive use of staging and dramatic recreation, and the film's subjects 'played' roles dictated by Flaherty. Fictional and non-fictional forms are always 'enmeshed in one another' (Renov, 1993: 2).

Nichols offers another, more nuanced, working definition that begins to fill in some of the gaps that are missing from accounts of the form that focus entirely on its distinction from the fiction film:

Documentary [is] a form of cinema that speaks to us about actual situations and events. It involves real people (social actors) who present themselves to us in stories that convey a plausible proposal about or perspective on the lives, situations and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a proposal or perspective on the historical world directly, adhering to known facts, rather than creating a fictional allegory. (Nichols, 2010: 142)

This goes a little further in sketching out some of the key attributes of the form. Notably, in its emphasis on the shaping of 'actual situations and events' into a story with a distinct perspective and point of view, it also highlights another important characteristic of the documentary that many other definitions draw attention to. These stress the fact that the documentary is more than just a 'simple' recording of reality. That is to say, it is more than just a filmic representation that appears to accurately represent the visible and audible aspects of reality. It also crafts and shapes these representations of reality through the use of particular cinematic techniques. This aspect of documentary's character, what Ward calls 'the capturing of some aspect of the real world and the people who inhabit it [and] the inevitable use of aesthetic and representational devices to achieve that aim' (Ward, 2012: 5), is often framed as a contradiction (or a kind of tension or conflict) and it has provoked a great deal of debate within documentary studies. As Stella Bruzzi notes, some documentary filmmakers and theorists have viewed this apparent conflict or tension between the real and its representation as a problem that needs to be surmounted (Bruzzi, 2006: 13). Bruzzi though, who makes a firm and convincing case *against* a critical orthodoxy that has often viewed documentary's ultimate aim as the 'authentic representation of the real', sees documentary as a perpetual negotiation between the real event and its representation—one in which the two remain 'distinct but interactive' (Bruzzi, 2006: 13).

Until relatively recently, there was a tendency within documentary studies to ignore or undervalue the significance of the aesthetic properties of the documentary. Documentary practice and theory have always had a problem with ‘aestheticisation’ (Bruzzi, 2006: 9). As John Corner notes, ‘The extent to which a concern with formal attractiveness “displaces” the referential such as to make the topic itself secondary to its formal appropriation has been a frequent topic of dispute’ (Corner, 1996: 123). Partly as a result of this bias towards the ‘referential’, for a long time documentaries did not receive the same level of critical attention and scrutiny of form and technique that is enjoyed by the fiction film. Documentaries tended to be explored through the lens of ethical, political, industrial and technological issues rather than aesthetic or formal ones (Grant and Sloniowski, 2014: 19). Just like the fiction film though, all documentaries select, shape and arrange sounds and images in ‘distinct ways, using specifically cinematic techniques and conventions’ (Nichols, 2010: 148). All documentary filmmakers make choices about the techniques that they use to represent reality, to express a particular view about the world or to advance a particular argument. Even the ‘actuality’ films of the Lumière brothers, often considered to be a kind of paragon of unmediated naturalism, are shaped (Grimshaw, 2001: 17). As Grimshaw notes, from ‘first viewing it is clear that [Lumière’s] films are neither random uncut footage nor are they offering an unmediated view of reality. Both the subject matter and the presentation reveal *conscious discrimination*’ (Grimshaw, 2001: 17-18, emphasis added). In this thesis I will demonstrate how this conscious discrimination—the way that a filmmaker shapes and arranges their material—not only reveals the underlying epistemological and ideological assumptions that motivate a work, but also has an impact on the kind of knowledge that a work conveys.

Today, theorists, practitioners and audiences increasingly recognise authorship and stylisation as intrinsic to documentary (Bruzzi, 2006: 9). As Bruzzi notes, ‘What has occurred in the past few years especially [...] is that the aesthetics of documentary—the acknowledged imposition of narrative structure, for example, or stylisation—have now become overt as opposed to clandestine components’ (Bruzzi, 2006: 9). The documentary is increasingly seen as a subjective, consciously constructed, creative art-form in which a wide spectrum of choices are made by the filmmaker in shaping and arranging those aspects of reality that they attend to. John Grierson, an early documentary maker and theorist, identified the centrality of this aspect of the documentary film to the form from the very beginning, neatly articulating it in an oft-quoted dictum. Documentary,

Grierson said, is ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ (Grierson, 1933: 8). In other words, documentary in the Griersonian view is more than just a document or recording of ‘actuality’. It is the creative shaping of that actuality into a work with a perspective, an argument or a voice.<sup>9</sup> Beginning in the late 1920s, Grierson was instrumental in founding what became known as the British documentary movement. His theory of documentary film, and the relationship between aesthetics and knowledge within Griersonian documentary, is explored in more detail in Chapter 2.

Grierson’s definition makes no attempt to reconcile these two seemingly conflicting aspects of documentary’s character—the apparent tension between ‘creative treatment’ on the one hand and ‘actuality’ on the other remains unresolved (Nichols, 2010: 7). One of the strengths of this brief definition is that it acknowledges that documentary is a fundamentally creative endeavour, but that the form also remains bound by a commitment (however deep or superficial that commitment may be) to the historical world. ‘Creative treatment’ implies that a filmmaker may exercise a certain degree of creative licence in producing a documentary film (in a way that perhaps has more in common with the fiction film). But its emphasis on actuality also implies the ethical and professional responsibilities of the journalist or historian (Nichols, 2010: 7). The fact that neither of these two aspects of documentary’s character has ‘full sway’, and that it ‘balances creative vision with a respect for the historical world’ is, as Nichols suggests, one of the most compelling aspects of the documentary form (Nichols, 2010: 7).

At one point ‘documentary’ was principally used to describe a fairly specific kind of factual film—namely, the kinds of films made by Grierson and his disciples in the 1920s and 1930s. But after many decades of formal and stylistic experimentation, theoretical developments, and technical innovation, ‘documentary’ now names a considerably larger range of practices. Documentaries ‘adopt no fixed inventory of techniques, address no one set of issues, display no single set of forms or styles [and] not all documentaries exhibit a single set of shared characteristics’ (Nichols, 2001: 21). Documentary is currently so heterogeneous a form and with borders so porous that it is extremely difficult to sustain the notion that stable categories exist within it (Ward, 2012: 1). As a result, concise and overarching definitions inevitably conceal more than they reveal (Nichols, 2010:

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<sup>9</sup> It is in this vein that Grierson distinguished documentary films ‘proper’ from what he called ‘lower categories’ of non-fiction films like the newsreel or lecture film (Grierson, 1932/1998c). These kinds of films lacked the organisation and high social purpose that, for Grierson, defined the documentary.

6). Today, instead of something stable and unchanging, documentary is increasingly seen as a heterogeneous, fluid form; and as Michael Chanan argues, arriving at a single, overarching or ‘watertight’ definition of the term that encompasses all of the various kinds of films and practices that sit under its umbrella is ‘effectively impossible’ (Chanan, 2007: 5). Clearly though, in order to be able to talk productively about documentary film, one does need to at least begin to delimit the boundaries of the field, however indistinct and nebulous these boundaries may be in practice.

For Bill Nichols, what is more important than the search for a single, simple definition, is thinking about ‘how every film we consider a documentary contributes to an ongoing dialogue that draws on common characteristics that take on new and distinct form, like an ever-changing chameleon’ (Nichols, 2010: 6). In other words, what is worth emphasising and exploring about the documentary is precisely this heterogeneous, mercurial, hybrid, and interconnected nature. ‘There are no laws and few genuine rules when it comes to creative expression’, Nichols writes, and ‘what actually counts as a documentary remains fluid’ (Nichols, 2010: 142). This situation is cause for celebration: ‘it makes for a dynamic, evolving form. Fluid, fuzzy boundaries are testimony to growth and vitality [...] fluid boundaries and a creative spirit yield an exciting, adaptable art form’ (Nichols, 2010: 143). This thesis is partly intended as an exploration of the invigorating potential of hybridity and interdisciplinarity. Ultimately it aims to draw attention to the new and different forms of creative expression—and the different ways in which knowledge is conceptualised within these different forms of creative expression—that result when artists, social-scientists, and filmmakers transgress generic and disciplinary boundaries.

### 3.1.1. Categorising Documentary

Because general definitions do little to help us distinguish between the many different types of documentary that exist, it is necessary to have a ‘more complex typology of modes of documentary, and how they interact, if we are to fully grasp the depth and breadth of the field’ (Ward, 2012: 6). Several writers have proposed exactly such a taxonomic approach to the documentary, but it is Nichols’ typology that has gained the most traction within documentary studies. Nichols’ work represents perhaps the most consistent and sustained attempt to provide, not a single definition, but a system of categorisation for the documentary film. His system subdivides documentaries into a

series of distinct ‘modes of representation’. These modes are ‘basic ways of organising texts in relation to certain recurrent features or conventions’ (Nichols, 1991: 32). Each mode functions something like a ‘sub-genre’ of the broader documentary genre (Nichols, 2001: 99).<sup>10</sup> To date Nichols has identified six distinct modes of documentary film.<sup>11</sup> These are: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive and performative (Nichols, 2010). Each has its own unique characteristics that define it as such, as well as ‘its exemplary filmmakers, its paradigmatic films, and its own forms of institutional support and audience expectation’ (Nichols, 2010: xvii).<sup>12</sup> Significantly for my project, Nichols ‘modes of representation’ also offer a useful framework through which to begin thinking about the relationship between the cinematic techniques that a documentary uses and its engagement with knowledge. ‘What do we seek to understand or comprehend?’ Nichols asks,

Is it factual information, or is it something more complex than that—something perhaps not entirely identifiable? Is knowledge best described as impersonal and disembodied, based on generalizations and abstract reasoning, in the tradition of Western philosophy? From this perspective, knowledge can be transferred or exchanged freely, and those who perform the transfer or exchange are only conduits for knowledge that remains unaltered by their personal involvement with it. But is knowledge better described as personal and embodied, rooted in experience, in the tradition of poetry, literature, art, and rhetoric? (Nichols, 2017: 149)

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<sup>10</sup> The use of the terms sub-genre and genre is apt given that some of the same difficulties confront those attempting to write about genre as those attempting to write about documentary. It could likewise be described as a ‘fuzzy concept’ with little agreement on how exactly the term should be used (Grant, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Nichols has expanded and refined these categories from the four he originally outlined in *Representing Reality* (1991). The first four modes that he identified were ‘expository’, ‘observational’, ‘interactive’ and ‘reflexive’. Nichols updated this taxonomy in *Blurred Boundaries* (1994a) to include the ‘performative’ mode. ‘Poetic’ was introduced in the first edition of *Introduction to Documentary* (2001). In the same title the ‘participatory’ mode replaced the older ‘interactive’ mode. This iteration of the modes is also found in the most recent edition of *Introduction to Documentary* (2017).

<sup>12</sup> Nichols’ model, which also functions as something of a crude history of the documentary form in which each mode appears after the previous one in chronological order, has been critiqued for its apparent implication that documentary filmmakers are on an endless quest ‘for better and more authentic ways to represent reality’ (Bruzzi, 2006: 4). Bruzzi argues that Nichols’ model implies that ‘somewhere in the utopian future, documentary will miraculously be able to collapse the difference between reality and representation altogether’ (Bruzzi, 2006: 4). I agree with Bruzzi’s assessment that it is wrong to think of documentary filmmakers as always striving to represent reality in an unmediated fashion, but it seems to me that her critique mischaracterises Nichols’ intentions somewhat. For instance, he is careful to stress that whilst his model might appear to suggest that one mode of expression gives way to the next as the strongest, most superior, or prevailing voice in documentary, his genealogy allows for the interpenetration and free mixing of modes. Rather than representing rigid and unchanging categories, Nichols’ model allows room for hybrid forms: ‘A more recent film need not have a more recent mode as its dominant. It can revert to an earlier mode while still including elements of later modes. A performative documentary can exhibit many qualities of a poetic documentary, for example. The modes do not represent an evolutionary chain in which later modes demonstrate superiority over earlier ones and vanquish them. Once established through a set of conventions and paradigmatic films, a given mode remains available to all’ (Nichols, 2001: 100).

The different strategies that a documentary utilises suggest different answers to these questions. Nichols suggests that each ‘mode’—as a result of the specific cinematic techniques it mobilises—engages with different ways of knowing. The expository mode, for instance, ‘assembles fragments of the historical world into a [...] rhetorical or argumentative frame’ (Nichols, 2001: 105).<sup>13</sup> The entire form of the expository film, its textual devices and the way in which these devices are marshalled, is geared towards constructing a convincing argument and conveying information about a particular subject (Nichols, 2010: 169). Nichols suggests that ‘knowledge’ in the expository documentary is often ‘epistemic’ knowledge, and what each ‘text contributes to this stockpile of knowledge is new content [and] a new field of attention to which familiar concepts and categories can be applied’ (Nichols, 1991: 35). This kind of knowledge can be thought of as roughly analogous with what epistemologists call ‘propositional’ knowledge. Propositional knowledge is knowledge that can be expressed with language; it is knowledge that can be communicated using declarative statements. As such this kind of knowledge is also sometimes called descriptive or declarative knowledge. In simple terms one could perhaps describe it as the knowledge of facts. It encompasses knowledge about a wide range of matters, in any field of study, from scientific knowledge, to self-knowledge, to mathematical knowledge. Propositional knowledge is the one that has received the most attention from epistemologists, in part because this kind of knowledge is the most straightforward to communicate—it can be transferred from one person to another through propositional statements (Zagzebski, 1999: 92).

Significantly then, the kind of arguments that expository documentaries advance ‘call for a logic that *words* are better able to convey than are images’ (Nichols, 2010: 28, emphasis added). This mode therefore places a much greater emphasis on verbal commentary (whether written or spoken), and language is central to the way these kinds of documentaries make their case. This is evident in the most conspicuous cinematic technique utilised by the expository documentary: the voice-over. This usually takes one of two forms: the voice-of-god narrator (where the person speaking is heard but not seen); or the voice-of-authority (where the person is occasionally seen on the screen as well as heard) (Nichols, 2001: 13-14). This commentary drives the argument or point

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<sup>13</sup> The expository mode is the one that is most closely associated with the documentary in the popular imagination, and it remains one of the most prevalent modes in use today. Examples of this mode include: *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1952), *Spanish Earth* (1937), *Les maîtres fous* (1955), and television news (Nichols, 2010).

of view in an expository documentary and images typically perform a supporting role to the words. They are most often illustrative of points that the commentary makes; throughout an expository documentary the organising logic of the voice-over helps us to make sense of the images we see. By contrast, unlike the expository mode, the cinematic techniques utilised by films within the *poetic* and *performative* modes suggest an engagement with ‘alternative forms of knowledge’ distinct from ‘the straightforward transfer of information’ (Nichols, 2001: 103).

The poetic mode ‘stresses mood, tone, and affect much more than displays of knowledge or acts of persuasion’ (Nichols, 2001: 103). Instead this mode emphasises ‘visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages and formal organisation’ (Nichols, 2010: 31). It is the mode that is closest in form to experimental/avant-garde film. In this category Nichols includes films such as Joris Ivens’ *The Bridge* (1928), a short, silent documentary film about a vertical lift railroad bridge that had recently been constructed in Rotterdam. Ivens constructs a rhythmic portrait of the huge structure, cutting together striking, carefully composed shots of different sections of the bridge’s architecture (which appears at times as a series of abstract shapes) and its complex mechanisms, with images of trains speeding across the track and boats sailing by underneath. Without using words, the formal strategies of Ivens’ film all contribute towards creating an overall impression of the bridge as an extraordinary feat of engineering and technical ingenuity. The film is intent on evoking in the viewer a sense of wonder at the bridge and its construction. It is a celebration of industry and modernity at the same time as it also revels in the simple aesthetic beauty of the geometric shapes that Ivens captures through his careful framing. In the course of Ivens’ film we learn nothing about, for instance, the dimensions of the bridge or how much steel was required to construct it. The poetic mode is therefore less concerned with concrete facts and information and more concerned with crafting an impressionistic portrayal of a particular subject. As Paul Ward notes, ‘the key to the poetic mode is that it is the aesthetic expression of aspects of the real that becomes the main focus, rather than the real *per se*’ (Ward, 2012: 14).





Fig. 1. Architecture as abstract shapes.

Source: Joris Ivens's *The Bridge* (1928)

In a similar vein, Trevor Ponech (2005) identifies certain documentaries—works of what he calls ‘artful’ non-fiction, such as Hollis Frampton’s (*nostalgia*) (1971)—as ‘cogitative non-fiction’. By this he means films that express ‘indirectly and artfully, a certain line of thinking, a thought being an idea entertained without commitment to asserting or affirming it’ (Ponech, 2005: 81). Such films, Ponech contends,

go beyond encouraging spectators to notice patterns and make abstract, formal associations. These works are surely about something, but they express their substantive conceptual content non-literally, employing images and sounds figuratively. Like figurative discourse in general, they are designed to provoke audiences to work out some range of ideas, not all of which the author had specifically in mind. Figurative communication is thus an interactive phenomena of use, the author’s role being to manipulate language or imagery in order to guide interpreters toward a somewhat open-ended set of meanings. (Ponech, 2005: 80)

What is missing from Ponech’s account of the non-fiction film though, and that this thesis ultimately aims to explore, is those non-fiction films that are neither purely expository and confirmative, nor purely cogitative, and that are instead primarily concerned with the evocation of a particular environment and with the communication of sensory/experiential qualities. However, Ponech does suggestively note that one of the cinema’s principal strengths is its ‘cognitive-affective’

qualities. He writes that ‘art can make knowledge concrete, vivid, salient, and emotionally interesting’ (Ponech, 2005: 86). That ‘art’, and particularly certain kinds of ‘artful’ or aesthetically inventive non-fiction cinema, is capable of engaging the viewer *affectively* as well as cognitively, is one of the principal themes of this thesis.

The last of Nichols’ modes that I want to highlight here draws much closer attention to the affective, experiential, subjective potential of film. ‘Performative’ documentaries, Nichols suggests, deflect ‘documentary emphasis away from a realist representation of the historical world and toward poetic liberties, more unconventional narrative structures, and more subjective forms of representation’ (Nichols, 2010: 203). Nichols notes that within performative films, the ‘referential quality of documentary that attests to its function as a window onto the world yields to an expressive quality that affirms the highly situated, embodied, and vividly personal perspective of specific subjects, including the filmmaker on that world’ (Nichols, 2010: 203). These films,

bring the emotional intensities of embodied experience and knowledge to the fore rather than attempt to do something tangible. If they set out to do something, it is to help us sense what a certain situation or experience *feels like*. They want us to feel on a visceral level more than understand on a conceptual level. [Their goal is] to have us feel or experience the world in a particular way as vividly as possible. (Nichols, 2010: 203, emphasis added)

Nichols includes Robert Gardner’s *Forest of Bliss* (1986) within this mode—a film that has had a significant influence on the work of the Sensory Ethnography Lab and which I explore in detail in Chapter 4. For me, what Nichols very briefly outlines here is *precisely* the goal of many SEL films. In Chapter 5 I argue that *Leviathan* in particular, through the use of certain cinematic techniques, achieves this goal to a remarkable degree.



Fig. 2. Documentary as vivid evocation of place.

Source: Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* (1986)

At this point it is worth reiterating the aims of this thesis. My intention is twofold. Firstly, I aim to explore some of the most significant formal and theoretical influences on two key SEL films: *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*. I identify and trace the historical shift in emphasis within a certain strand of documentary and ethnographic filmmaking *away* from conceptions of knowledge as objective, impersonal and disembodied, and *towards* conceptions of knowledge as personal, subjective, situated, experiential and embodied. Secondly, by drawing on theoretical frameworks from film studies, namely Laura Marks' (Marks, 1998; 2000) concept of 'haptic visuality', I identify and analyse the cinematic techniques through which *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* are able to convey this latter kind of knowledge. Ultimately I suggest that it is through the adoption, modification, or rejection of the representational strategies utilised by the lab's cinematic precursors, and specifically through using certain 'haptic' audiovisual strategies, these films are able to convey 'embodied' knowledge.

### 3.2. Visual Anthropology

The term visual anthropology names a field that encompasses a diverse range of interests and practices. These can be difficult to parse, in part because visual anthropology has been marked by a somewhat inconsistent and uneven development (MacDougall, 2006). Historically, it has also always been something of a marginal practice, one that has not been accorded the same level of academic recognition as the wider, 'mainstream' discipline of anthropology (Ruby, 2005; MacDougall, 2006). However, recent years have seen an explosion of interest in the sub-discipline,<sup>14</sup> building on an already significant momentum that took hold during the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> But as MacDougall suggests only somewhat rhetorically, in spite of this mounting interest no one seems to know quite what it is: 'some conceive of visual anthropology as a research technique, others as a field of study, others as a teaching tool, still others as a means of publication, and others again as a new approach to anthropological knowledge' (MacDougall, 1998: 61). The term, MacDougall suggests, is 'an act of faith, like a suit of clothes bought a little too large in the hope that someone will grow in to it' (MacDougall, 1998: 61).

Jay Ruby (2005) and Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy (1997) offer more precise definitions; they understand visual anthropology to be a recognised branch of cultural anthropology that is concerned, in equal measure, with the production, presentation and consumption of anthropological knowledge. Banks and Morphy clarify this definition further, noting that visual anthropology has a duality of focus: 'on the one hand [it] concerns the use of visual material in anthropological research [...] and on the other it is the study of visual systems and visible culture [...] it both produces visual texts and consumes them' (Banks and Morphy, 1997: 1-2). In this thesis I am solely concerned with visual anthropology as the production of visual texts. I do not concern myself with, for instance, written anthropological texts devoted to the study of (typically non-Western) art. The view that this thesis takes of visual anthropology is that it is a practice that sits at the intersection of documentary film and cultural anthropology (de Sardan, 1999).

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<sup>14</sup> A considerable amount of this recent interest has centred around the interdisciplinary space between anthropology and visual art, a liminal zone that the work of the SEL inhabits to a certain extent. See Arnd Schneider & Christopher Wright's edited volume *Between Art & Anthropology* (2010) for a comprehensive overview of recent developments within this area and a thoughtful commentary on some of the theoretical and practical challenges posed by such a union.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed summary of this activity see Jay Ruby's (2005) critical overview of the sub-discipline.

This is perhaps the most common understanding of the term: ‘for many people “visual anthropology” is the production of films which are then used in classrooms or in other audience settings’ (Collier and Collier, 1986: 140, emphasis in original). In this sense visual anthropology is often used interchangeably with the terms ethnographic film and anthropological film (Durlington, 2013). I will follow this convention throughout this thesis, except of course where it is relevant to my argument to clarify subtle differences in emphasis, or to address points of contention that arise from different understandings of these terms. This study is also only concerned with a narrow set of issues and questions within the field of visual anthropology. Principally, my interest revolves around the question of what images and sounds can convey that words cannot. This is a question that is at the very heart of visual anthropology (Ruby, 1994). Specifically I am interested in the contention—espoused by theorist/practitioners like David MacDougall (1998; 2006) and Sarah Pink (2006; 2015)—that through the use of certain formal strategies, audiovisual media can communicate the sensuous, embodied experiences of a group of people and/or the anthropologists themselves to audiences in a way that is unavailable to written or spoken language (Pink, 2015: 26).

One of the reasons why visual anthropology has historically been marginalised by the mainstream discipline is because anthropology has always primarily been a ‘discipline of words’ (Mead, 1975/2003); anthropological research in which textual devices remain the principal means of articulating and disseminating knowledge have typically always been perceived as more legitimate forms of intellectual inquiry (Grimshaw, 2011: 248). Meanwhile, visual anthropologies that proceed along imagistic or predominantly non-verbal lines have often been seen as suspect. As Grimshaw notes,

Exploring the visual as a medium of inquiry has always been a more difficult and challenging task. Frequently subversive of the expectations and assumptions of textual anthropology [...] visual anthropologies have rarely been understood for what they are. Generally, they are condemned for what they are not—that is, for not doing what textual anthropology does [...] It has been difficult to persuade anthropologists that not only are the intentions of the filmmaker (or other visual practitioner) different from their own as textual scholars but also the analytical work of filmmaking proceeds according to different principles. (Grimshaw, 2011: 248-249)

In an article that contains the seeds of the filmmaking philosophy that would be put into practice with the Sensory Ethnography Lab, the lab’s founder and current director Lucien Castaing-Taylor casts this antipathy towards the visual in memorable terms as an ‘Iconophobia’ (1996). Castaing-

Taylor asserts that much of the criticism that has been levelled against visual anthropology stems from this ‘fear of images’ on the part of ‘logos-centric’ anthropologists. He argues that for those anthropologists committed to a textual understanding of anthropological inquiry, images simply say too much. Or as J.P. Sniadecki puts it: ‘the open ended nature [of the image] expands rather than restrains the possibilities for interpretation’ (Sniadecki, 2014: 26). Sniadecki outlines the implications of this excess of meaning for anthropologists: ‘If everyone can engage excess—understood in anthropological discourse as social complexity and cultural difference—on its own terms, drawing conclusions for themselves, then anthropologists are no longer necessary, or so the argument goes’ (Sniadecki, 2014: 26). The ‘iconophobia’ of certain anthropologists can thus be explained as an anxiety ‘over the evocative and ambiguous image dethroning written anthropology as the preferred mode of cultural translation’ (Sniadecki, 2014: 26). As noted above, a crucial difference between words and images that has been highlighted by some advocates of visual anthropology, including the SEL, is the extent to which audiovisual media are able to engage with and perhaps communicate something of the multi-sensory experiences that are always a part of anthropological fieldwork. In contrast to the logocentric approach to anthropological inquiry, which tends to deny ‘much of the multi-sensory experience of trying to know another culture’ visual anthropology promises a different, more sensuous, mode of engagement with the world (Ruby, 1996: 1351).<sup>16</sup>

David MacDougall, whose filmmaking philosophy is a key touchstone for Castaing-Taylor and the filmmakers associated with the SEL, has been one of the strongest voices championing the idea that filmmaking proceeds according to entirely different principles than the written word, and that it should therefore be judged accordingly (MacDougall, 1998: 63). MacDougall suggests that visual anthropology should define itself, not ‘in the terms of a written anthropology but as an alternative to it, as a quite different way of knowing related phenomena’ (MacDougall, 1998: 63). He argues that anthropological films present a genuine, distinct process of inquiry,

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Loizos illustrates this point with a brief description of a film by the anthropologists Napoleon Chagnon and Timothy Asch: ‘One of [their] more powerful films was *Magical Death*, filmed largely by Chagnon, in which some shamans brought their powers to bear in a psychic attack upon an enemy village. In seeing the very real expenditure of energy used, and hearing the roars of hostility and malevolence which were part of the performance of such an attack, we could be made to grasp in a different way matters which in a monograph tend to be rendered and communicated in an abstract and somewhat bloodless manner. Once one has seen what such an attack looks like, the cultural reality of such matters becomes manifest’ (1993: 25-28).

They develop their understandings progressively, and reveal an evolving relationship between the filmmaker, subject, and audience. They do not provide a “pictorial representation” of anthropological knowledge, but *a form of knowledge that emerges through the very grain of the filmmaking*. (MacDougall, 1998: 76, emphasis added)

The form of knowledge that emerges through the ‘very grain of the filmmaking’—in other words, through a film’s formal strategies—is a knowledge that is rooted in our sensory, embodied experiences of the world. This is a conception of anthropological knowledge in which ‘meaning is not merely the outcome of reflection upon experience but necessarily *includes* the experience. In part [...] the experience *is* the knowledge’ (MacDougall, 1998: 79, emphasis in original).

This conception of knowledge challenges the ‘mind-body’ divide that is prevalent within mainstream scientific discourse. As Sarah Pink notes, sensory experience has often been regarded as existing on two levels that separate the body and the mind. Pink’s gloss of the position of the anthropologist Victor Turner (1986) with regards to this issue is instructive, and worth repeating in full here. Turner (1986) argued,

that we should distinguish between “mere experience” (the continuous flow of events that we passively accept) and “an experience” (a defined and reflected on event that has a beginning and an end) (1986: 35). Turner’s approach separated body and mind by allocating each distinct roles in the production of experience. The distinction between sensation and intellect implied by the idea that one might define a corporeal experience by reflecting on it and giving it meaning, however, implies a separation between body and mind and between doing (or practice) and knowing. This implies the objectification of the corporeal experience by the rational(ising) mind. (Pink, 2015: 26)

By contrast, MacDougall’s conception of ‘experiential knowledge’ suggests a very different understanding of sensory experience and the relationship between the mind and the body. MacDougall draws on Bertrand Russell’s (1912) distinction between what Russell calls *knowledge by acquaintance* and *knowledge by description* to suggest that the kind of knowledge that films present us with is distinct from that which we derive from a kind of conscious, linguified reflection (MacDougall, 1998: 78). MacDougall suggests that Russell’s notion of *knowledge by description* can be thought of as a knowledge derived from language, while *knowledge by acquaintance* is derived from ‘the direct awareness of sense-data, memory [and] introspection (that is our awareness of being aware, through thought and emotion)’ (MacDougall, 1998: 78). For MacDougall, there is a parallel to be drawn between the two kinds of knowledge Russell identifies and ‘the specificity of

objects in films (the sense-data of them) in contrast to the generality of the language that stands for them in written texts' (MacDougall, 1998: 78). MacDougall argues that the concept of *acquaintance* is useful for distinguishing 'some of the more experiential qualities of films from the more abstractly coded ones: a person's face from the words the person is speaking; the texture of a bird's feathers from the idea of a bird as a cultural symbol of hope or resurrection' (MacDougall, 1998: 78).

MacDougall provides an example that helps to further clarify the character of this experiential knowledge. He recounts the story of a filmmaker, Gary Kildea, who, when exhibiting an early version of one of his films to another anthropologist, was quizzed about the population size of the village depicted in his film. Kildea's interlocutor wished to know the 'basic facts' about this particular village, which he felt were missing from the film itself. At first Kildea doubts himself and his approach, but writing later realises: 'Why offer statistics as an indicator of scale when a single wide shot reveals—all at once—*that* village in all its specificity; a village of *that* size' (Kildea quoted in MacDougall, 1998: 78, emphasis in original). This understanding of experience, perception and bodily ways of knowing sits neatly within a broad current of theoretical and practical developments within the humanities and social sciences that has been characterised as a 'sensory turn' (see Pink, 2009; Lauwrens, 2012; Howes, 2013; et al.). I explore this development in more detail in **section 4**. Firstly though, I want to address the question of definition in relation to the last of my key terms: ethnographic film. In this section I also begin to draw attention to one of the key issues related to ethnographic filmmaking that this thesis is concerned with—the tension between conceptions of ethnographic film as a 'science' and ethnographic film as an 'art'.

### 3.3. Ethnographic Film

The question of what exactly constitutes an ethnographic film is a much discussed issue within visual anthropology. One attempt at definition comes from Mark McCarty, who suggests that the aim of an ethnographic film is to 'capture the feeling, the sounds, and the speech of a culture from the intimate ground of those inside it - and to present this culture to others for serious and intelligent evaluation' (McCarty, 1975/2003: 74). While helpful, this definition ignores the 'interminable debates' about the form's parameters that have been an almost constant fixture of the discourse around ethnographic cinema (Ruby, 2000: 2). As Durington suggests, 'perhaps no other



practice or concept in the lexicon of visual anthropology is more contested than ethnographic filmmaking' (Durlington, 2013). Historically a sharp divide has existed between the attitudes of those who advocate narrow definitions of ethnographic film based on its relationship with anthropology (and with specific research methodologies associated with the discipline) (Heider, 1976/2006; Ruby, 2000) and those who advocate broader definitions that stress the form's affinity not only with the documentary film more broadly, but also with the fiction film (Russell, 1999; MacDougall, 2006). Weinberger offers the following short etymology of the term which, given its breadth, helps us to begin to understand some of the reasons for the lack of consensus on the issue of definition:

*'Ethnos*, "a people"; *graphie*, "a writing, a drawing, a representation." Ethnographic film, then: "a representation on film of a people." A definition without limit, a process with unlimited possibilities, an artifact with unlimited variation'. (Weinberger, 1992: 24)

Broad interpretations of ethnographic film lean towards an understanding that adheres closely to this 'definition without limit'. At the most extreme end of this side of the spectrum is a view that Karl Heider encapsulates with his suggestion that 'in some sense one could argue that all films are "ethnographic": they are about people. Even films that show only clouds or lizards have been made by people and therefore say something about the culture of the individuals who made them and who use them' (Heider, 1976/2006: 4). By contrast, Paul Henley's definition of an ethnographic film as one made 'under the circumstances conforming to the norms associated with the characteristically anthropological fieldwork method of participant observation' (Henley, 2000: 218) is illustrative of the narrow end of the spectrum. Likewise, anthropologists like Ruby (1975) and Heider (1976/2006) have made a clear distinction between the ethnographic film and the documentary, suggesting that the criteria for defining a film as ethnographic ought to be drawn primarily from written anthropological research. In their definitions they typically exclude films made by non-anthropologists thought to be lacking in the necessary disciplinary training. Ruby for instance, argues that the use of the term ethnographic film should be 'confined to those works in which the maker had formal training in ethnography, intended to produce an ethnography, employed ethnographic field practices, and sought validation among those competent to judge the work as an ethnography' (Ruby, 2000: 6).

Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan however, has suggested that ‘there is no clear boundary which separates the subgroup of “ethnographic film” from the genre of “documentary film” of which it forms a part’ (de Sardan, 1999: 24). Though scholars like Ruby would clearly disagree, de Sardan’s claim is based on the premise that there are few concrete differences that one could point to with which one is able to clearly distinguish the documentary from the ethnographic film. Both depend ‘upon the same constraints upon its forms of communication (in brief: the cinematic language) and upon the same requirements as to its purpose (giving an account of a known or unknown reality)’ (de Sardan, 1999: 14). A similar position is also advanced by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor in their co-authored textbook *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos* (1997). *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking* is one of the core texts on the Sensory Ethnography curriculum, and the mixture of theoretical context and practical filmmaking advice that it contains provides a useful insight into the approach to filmmaking that is advanced in Sensory Ethnography Lab works. In it Barbash and Castaing-Taylor use the term documentary to refer to both ‘explicitly ethnographic and not-so explicitly ethnographic documentary’ (Barbash and Taylor, 1997: 4). ‘There is no precise distinction between ethnographic and documentary films’, they write:

All films, fiction films too, contain ethnographic information, both about the people they depict and about the culture of the filmmaker. And some documentaries are richer and reveal more about human experience than films that call themselves ethnographic. Though ethnographic films have characteristics of their own, they can't be weeded out from the broader documentary traditions from which they have borrowed, and to which, in part, they belong. (Barbash and Taylor, 1997: 4)

Peter Loizos also maintains that ethnographic films are a subset of the documentary, and urges anthropologists not to become too ‘narrowly concerned with a ghetto-culture called “ethnographic films”’ (Loizos, 1993: 5). Though he believes that it is useful to have ‘guidelines’ for framing a particular film as ethnographic, Loizos also advocates seeing all films that are ‘thoughtfully made’ as ‘valuable repositories of cultural knowledge’ (Loizos, 1993: 50). While stopping short of the belief that *all* films are ethnographic (as in Heider’s rhetorical suggestion above) with regards to this debate I am in agreement with Barbash, Castaing-Taylor, de Sardan and Loizos. While I believe there are certain distinctions that can be drawn between the two, my principal position is that ‘documentaries’ and ‘ethnographic films’ are fundamentally related and interconnected.

In addition to this, I also share Robert Gardner's view that the kinds of restrictive definitions of ethnographic film advocated by Ruby and others—who Gardner sardonically describes as 'keepers of the flame of ethnographic film "truth"' (Gardner, 2010: 274)—have had a limiting effect on the kinds of cinematic techniques that ethnographic cinema has historically engaged with. In a letter to a friend written in the 1990s Gardner bemoaned what he describes as the 'emptiness' of the 'hapless genre [of ethnographic film] perpetuated in endless, solemn debate by social scientists, arguing, finally, for nothing other than a cinema bereft of aesthetic concerns' (Gardner, 2010: 274). Restrictive and prescriptive definitions lead to a neglect of the broader creative potential offered by film as a means of exploring reality and producing and conveying knowledge. It is my view that it is precisely through embracing a broader range of the aesthetic and creative possibilities of the moving image that the works I explore in the second part of this thesis are able to engage more fully with lived experience. Gardner's work, celebrated by some and maligned by others, is representative of one side of a long running debate within visual anthropology that still persists to some extent to this day. This debate is often characterised as a tension between the 'science' of ethnography, and the 'art' of film. The impact that this debate has had on the form, function, and development of ethnographic films is explored in more detail in Chapter 1. In the next and final section of this introduction I turn my attention to the shift towards a focus on the body and the senses as both an object of study and a means of inquiry that has taken place across the humanities and social sciences in recent years.

#### 4. THE SENSORY TURN

Over the past few decades, interest in the body and the senses has proliferated across a variety of disciplines and practices that are concerned with understanding human experience. In a shift that has been characterised as a 'sensory turn' (see Pink, 2009; Lauwrens, 2012; Howes, 2013; et al.) the body and the senses have become important loci for a range of theoretical, methodological and practical developments. Within anthropology and related disciplines the sensory turn has led to scholars reconceptualising the relationship between the body and knowledge, and within both visual anthropology and film studies it has led to an increased attention to the potential of audiovisual media to engage with and perhaps convey or evoke multi-sensory experiences (Pink, 2015; MacDougall, 2006; Marks, 2000). I explore the sensory turn within film studies specifically in

more detail in **section 4.2**. Firstly though, I want to outline the origins of this broad intellectual development, and signpost some of the key issues that are of most concern to me within this thesis. It is a shift in focus that is phenomenological in orientation—in the sense that phenomenology is concerned with the world as it is lived and experienced—and many of the scholars associated with this development make reference to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002). Its influence can be felt across fields as diverse as art history, sociology, geography, design research, and film and media studies. However, the origins of this sensory turn are to be found primarily within the disciplines of history and anthropology (Howes, 2013).

The body has been an important locus of inquiry within anthropology since the early twentieth century, but this recent manifestation of interest within the discipline solidified around a series of seminal anthropological works written in the 1980s and 1990s. Works by writers like Steven Feld (1982/2012), Michael Jackson (1983; 1989) and Paul Stoller (1989; 1997) played a key role in setting the agenda for a sub-discipline that came to be known as ‘the anthropology of the senses’ (Pink, 2015). In part this sensory turn within anthropology was motivated by a critique of written language and its ability to adequately engage with the multi-sensory nature of lived experience. Critical of the ‘disembodied’ nature of much contemporary ethnographic research, these initial forays into an anthropology of the senses questioned the discipline’s reliance on linguistic and textual modes of research and analysis. As I noted in **section 3.2.**, words have always been central to the discipline of anthropology. Interviews and participant testimony are a cornerstone of the ethnographic process, and the principal method of disseminating research findings was, and to a significant degree still is, through the academic monograph or journal article. But as David Howes—another of the key thinkers within this ‘sensual revolution’—has noted, the early 1980s saw a renewed emphasis on ‘text’ that further exacerbated this verbal bias (Howes, 2013). Within this new ‘writing culture’ framework (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), cultures were seen as ‘texts’ to be read, and ethnography a process of ‘textualisation’. This emphasis, Howes suggests, ‘distracted attention from *sensing* cultures’ (Howes, 2013, emphasis added). In contrast, those advocating an anthropology of the senses stressed the need for what Howes has called ‘a full bodied understanding of culture and experience’ (Howes, 2005: 1).

Developments within the anthropology of the senses were also influenced by and related to the notion of ‘embodiment’ as a paradigm within anthropology. Thomas Csordas’ (1990) work for instance, which drew on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the ‘practice theory’ of Pierre Bourdieu, helped to instigate a reconceptualisation of the ethnographic process, and ethnographic experiences, as ‘embodied’—suggesting that the researcher learns and comes to know not simply through disembodied cognitive/intellectual effort, but also through ‘her or his whole experiencing body’ (Pink, 2015: 27). As Anna Harris notes, ‘Although the concept becomes different things in different places, broadly speaking [...] embodiment is a way of describing porous, visceral, felt, enlivened bodily experiences, in and with inhabited worlds’ (Harris, 2016). Pink suggests that one important implication of this new emphasis was a deconstruction of ‘the notion of a mind/body divide’ and an arrival at an understanding of the body not simply ‘as a source of experience and activity that would be rationalised and/or controlled by the mind, but itself as a source of knowledge’ (Pink, 2015: 26). Margaret Lock has called this phenomenon the ‘decentering’ of ‘the cognitive construction of knowledge’ (Lock, 1993: 136).

This intellectual, theoretical and practical activity has had a major impact on how anthropologists seek to undertake research and represent their findings—in written texts and in audiovisual ones (Pink, 2015: 4). Reframing knowledge as embodied and experiential has led to a reconceptualisation of the role that *audiovisual* media in particular can play in both the research process itself, and in conveying this kind of knowledge to audiences. New technologies have played a particularly important role in this development: ‘digital visual and audio methods and media are being used to research sensory experience, knowledge and practice across the social sciences and humanities’ (Pink, 2015: xiv). As Pink notes, these technologies are being mobilised to explore how ‘the multisensory realities of ethnographers’ and research participants’ lives might be represented [and] how representations might be developed to communicate something of both the ethnographer’s own experiences and those of the people participating in the research, to their audiences’ (Pink, 2015: xv). These developments are often framed under the label of ‘sensuous fieldwork’ or ‘sensory ethnography’.

## 4.1. Sensory Ethnography

The term ‘sensory ethnography’ has been applied to a wide range of research and communication practices within the humanities and social sciences, with Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab perhaps the most widely known example. The SEL offers one possible interpretation of this term. In a statement on their website, the SEL describes itself as:

an experimental laboratory at Harvard University that promotes innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography. It uses analog and digital media 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, the 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 propositional prose. Most works produced in the SEL take as their subject the bodily praxis and affective fabric of human and animal existence. (SEL, 2016)

There are a number of significant points of note in this statement. The first is the move away from anthropology as a ‘discipline of words’ and towards an exploration of the multisensory aspects of existence that are difficult to articulate verbally. This is a position that is consistent with the sensory turn in anthropology more broadly, as outlined above. The second is the active embrace of, and integration of *aesthetics* and ethnography. These positions are representative of two of the major themes that will be explored throughout this thesis—the move away from discursive, propositional knowledge and towards non-verbal, embodied knowledge, and the centrality of aesthetic experimentation to this shift—and they are central to my analysis of the two SEL films I focus on in Chapter 5.

The term ‘sensory ethnography’ also notably appears in the title of Sarah Pink’s textbook/fieldwork manual *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (2009/2015), which advocates a ‘way of thinking about and doing ethnography that takes as its starting point the multisensoriality of experience, perception, knowing and practice’ (Pink, 2015: xi). Pink frames her understanding of sensory ethnography as a rethinking of traditional ethnographic methods *through* the senses. She defines ethnography as,

a process of creating and representing knowledge or ways of knowing that are based on ethnographers’ own experiences and the ways these intersect with the persons, places and things encountered during that process. Therefore visual ethnography, as I interpret it, does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of

ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, the embodied, sensory and affective experiences, and the negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced. (Pink, 2013: 35)

Pink's work draws on the earlier work of anthropologists like Paul Stoller and Steven Feld, in asking how a scholar's own sensory or embodied experiences might assist them in learning about other people's worlds. Feld's *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (1982/2012) for instance, is also described as a 'sensory ethnography'—set in the rainforests of Papua New Guinea. Feld's work stressed the importance of music and sound to Kaluli culture. It is a book that, in Feld's words, 'yearned [...] to embrace phenomenology and the senses, to move from text to voice, from symbols to synaesthesia, from indexicality to iconicity, from cognition to bodily knowing' (Feld, 2012: xxx). Meanwhile, Paul Stoller's *Sensuous Scholarship* (1997) enjoined the anthropologist to pay attention to their 'experience-in-the-world' (Stoller, 1997: xi) and to attempt to give their written representations of culture a sensuous, embodied quality that better reflects the way we actually interact with one another and with the world; i.e., with our whole body and with all of our senses.

Within visual anthropology specifically, Karen Nakamura (2013) identifies two broad kinds of 'sensory ethnography' (though she notes that there is considerable crossover between the two). The SEL's work falls broadly within the first kind, which she names 'aesthetic-sensual ethnography'. Nakamura contends that this conception of sensory ethnography is about the conveyance of 'emotional states through vivid aesthetic-sensual immersion' (Nakamura, 2013: 133). Significantly, she describes SEL filmmakers as the 'intellectual progeny' of Robert Gardner, and notes that Gardner's work, and *Forest of Bliss* in particular, had a major impact on this recent development (Nakamura, 2013: 132). The second kind of sensory ethnography that Nakamura identifies is what she calls 'multi-sensory experiential ethnography' (Nakamura, 2013). This form of sensory ethnography is primarily about promoting the 'greater use of multisensory experiential data (vision, taste, hearing, smell, touch etc.) in traditional ethnographic fieldwork' (Nakamura, 2013: 133). Within this second category Nakamura places the work of Pink, Stoller and MacDougall.



Fig. 3. The affective fabric of animal existence in SEL films.

Source: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash's *Sweetgrass* (2009)

In her brief overview of these developments, Nakamura argues that work produced by the Sensory Ethnography Lab focuses ‘overwhelmingly [...] on just two dimensions of sensory experience: hearing and vision’ (Nakamura, 2013: 133). It is true that the SEL’s work is indeed comprised entirely of audio/visual works of ‘film, video, phonography, and photography’ (SEL, 2016). However, while SEL work may on the surface be constitutively audiovisual, that does not preclude the possibility that such representations engage the senses beyond vision and audition. As Nakamura notes, ‘not only are our senses capable of conveying much more information than we are normally aware but also [...] sensory information rarely acts alone. Synesthesia is a part of all of our existence: smells can trigger the sense of touch, sights can trigger sounds, and sounds can trigger senses of touch’ (Nakamura, 2013: 135). Practical and theoretical developments within the ‘sensory turn’ all rest to some degree on this understanding. Pink’s approach to sensory ethnography for instance, is based on a ‘theoretical commitment to understanding the senses as interconnected and not always possible to understand as if separate categories’ (Pink, 2015: xiii). Recent work within film theory that also belongs within the broad turn towards the body and the senses described in this section suggests that certain cinematic techniques and aesthetic strategies are more effective than others at taking advantage of this latent synesthesia—this interconnected nature of the senses—and thus capitalising on the capacity of audiovisual media to evoke or convey sensory experiences beyond seeing and hearing. I now want to outline these theoretical approaches within film studies as they provide the foundation upon which my argument rests. As I have already noted,



in Chapter 5 I draw on and extend the theoretical approach outlined by Laura Marks—primarily in her book *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000)—in order to demonstrate the strategies by which the two Sensory Ethnography Lab films I analyse are able to convey embodied knowledge.

## 4.2. The Sensory Turn in Film Studies

The corresponding ‘sensory turn’ within film studies is exemplified by the work of writers such as Vivian Sobchack (2004), Laura Marks (2000; 2002), Steven Shaviro (1993) and Jennifer Barker (2009). These theorists have all advanced approaches to film theory that place an ‘embodied spectator’ at the core of their thinking. Much like the parallel intellectual shift within anthropology described above, this work also stems from a desire to question and rethink the mind-body divide.<sup>17</sup> Common to much of the work in this vein is a critique of what might be described as a kind of ‘intellectual detachment’ within film theory. For Sobchack and others, this intellectual detachment constitutes a disavowal of what these writers see as the fundamentally embodied, subjective, corporeal nature of film viewing. In ‘What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh’ (2004) for instance, Sobchack draws attention to the ways in which film theory has typically ‘ignored or elided both cinema’s sensual address and the viewer’s corporeal-material being’ (Sobchack, 2004: 55-56). She argues that a gap exists ‘between our actual experience of cinema and the theory that we academic film scholars construct to explain it’ (Sobchack, 2004: 53). As Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener remark, ‘We take in films somatically, with our whole body, and we are affected by images even before cognitive information processing or unconscious identification addresses and envelops us on another level’ (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 117). Or as Sobchack puts it, ‘the film experience is meaningful not to the side of our bodies but *because* of our bodies’ (Sobchack, 2004: 60, emphasis added). Therefore, Sobchack and others contend, in order to fully explore and account for the experience of film viewing it is necessary to construct a theory of film that acknowledges our ‘carnal responses’ as well as our intellectual or cognitive ones.

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, in this vein Steven Shaviro writes that to hold the assumption that ‘the human experience is originally and fundamentally cognitive is to reduce the question of perception to a question of knowledge, and to equate sensation with the reflective consciousness of sensation. The Hegelian and structuralist equation suppresses the body. It ignores or abstracts away from the primordial forms of raw sensation: affect, excitation, stimulation and repression, pleasure and pain, shock and habit. It posits instead a disincarnate eye and ear whose data are immediately objectified in the form of self-conscious awareness or positive knowledge’ (Shaviro, 1993: 26-27).

Laura Marks' work draws on and expands upon Vivian Sobchack's. In *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (2002), Marks remarks that throughout her intellectual explorations she attempts to make her own body and her own personal history an integral part of her criticism (Marks, 2002: xi). Such a subjective, embodied approach runs directly counter to dominant theoretical models that stress the importance of critical distance and intellectual objectivity. There are parallels here between Marks' approach and other, more detached or intellectualising theoretical frameworks, and the way that the senses of vision and touch have typically been conceived of within Western thought. Because the object of one's sight typically remains at a remove from one's body, vision is often thought of as an objectifying sense. This is seen as a situation which allows for the critical distance necessary for intellectual analysis. By contrast, with the sense of touch the object perceived is up close and in direct contact with the body. Such a mode of perception is therefore less conducive to intellectual, critical distance. Instead, when touching, the objectifying distance that vision affords is replaced by proximity and subjectivity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the nature of the medium, approaches to the analysis of film throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century have typically centred around vision. They have taken sight as the sensory model through which we can better understand the cinema (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 21). Much of the work within the sensory turn in film studies stems from a desire to question the dominance of vision as a critical framework—it constitutes a challenge to what Sobchack has called 'the cultural hegemony of vision' (Sobchack, 2004: 64).

Film is of course a predominantly visual medium, and to dispute the significance of this sense to ways of thinking about cinema entirely would be, to use an apt sensory metaphor, short-sighted if not altogether blind. But, as many of the thinkers associated with this sensory turn within film studies have pointed out, theories that focus entirely on vision suffer from their own blind spots. As Elsaesser and Hagener note, the 'eye/gaze constellation [of contemporary film theory] contains its own aporia: the modern subject' (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 125). Though their work challenges and critiques these 'ocularcentric' models, all these approaches share the suggestion that the full spectrum of our sensory faculties, not just vision and hearing, are involved in producing meaning when we watch a film, and that any theory that attempts to understand cinema must acknowledge this fact. Writers like Sobchack, Marks and Shaviro have advanced approaches that are predicated not on a 'negation of the visual, but rather [an] attempt to understand the senses in their interplay

and perception as embodied' (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 110). Alongside their critique of film theory's failure to take into account the body of the spectator as a crucial site of meaning making then, these writers also share an understanding of the senses not as distinct, but as *interconnected*. As I noted in the previous section, such a conception of the senses is common to much of the work in this area. As Pink notes, this is also a view that is supported by recent work in neurobiology that suggests that the senses work in concert—that they overlap and interpenetrate (Pink, 2015: 28-29). Sobchack describes this as a 'transmodal cooperation and translation within and across the sensorium' (Sobchack, 2004: 65).

In *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (2000) Marks emphasises the 'multisensory quality of perception' and 'the involvement of all the senses even in the audiovisual act of cinematic viewing' (Marks, 2000: 131). She describes the process of watching Shauna Beharry's video *Seeing is Believing* (1991) for instance, as follows: 'the tape has been using my vision as though it were a sense of touch; I have been brushing the (image of the) fabric with the skin of my eyes, rather than looking at it [...] the difference between the senses collapses slightly' (Marks, 2000: 127). Marks' objective is to suggest how film and video, which are *audiovisual* media, can represent or convey *non*-audiovisual sense experiences. She does this in part through reference to a concept she names 'haptic visuality'. Haptic visuality understands 'vision as embodied and material' (Marks, 2002: xii). It is a process of seeing in which the 'eyes themselves function like organs of touch' (Marks, 2002: 2). Marks suggests that through our eyes, our whole body is able to perceive, and in a meaningful sense, *feel* the tactile qualities of the images we see on a cinema screen, or on a video monitor in an art gallery. This points to the possibility of vision stimulating the other senses too. Haptic images, Marks suggests 'invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate other sensory impressions as well' (Marks, 2000: 2)

By appealing to one sense in order to represent the experience of another, cinema appeals to the integration and commutation of sensory experience within the body. Each audiovisual image meets a rush of other sensory associations. Audiovisual images call up conscious, unconscious, and non-symbolic associations with touch, taste, and smell, which themselves are not experienced as separate. Each image is synthesized by a body that does not necessarily divide perceptions into different sense modalities. (Marks, 2000: 222)

Marks argues that some audiovisual works are more 'haptically' charged than others. She expounds her theory of haptic visuality through reference to works of intercultural cinema, that is to say, work

by artists working between and across cultures, often cultural minorities in the West—the result, Marks writes, of ‘global flows of immigration, exile and diaspora’ (Marks, 2000: 1). Filmmaking of this kind is often highly stylised, and the audiovisual works that Marks chooses to analyse reflect this, they are largely experimental videos and works by artists working in the margins of several different cultures. The films that Marks explores, which are by their very nature oppositional and marginal, offer a counter approach to dominant ‘ways of seeing’—critiquing and challenging the primacy of vision within Western thought. Marks argues that ‘these works evoke memories, both individual and cultural, through an appeal to non-visual knowledge, embodied knowledge, and experiences such as touch, smell, and taste’ (Marks, 2000: 2). Marks’ notion of ‘haptic visuality’ offers the fullest account of how the audiovisual medium of film can convey sensory experience beyond vision and hearing. As already noted, I return to discuss her theory again in more detail in Chapter 5, where I employ it in order to analyse the formal strategies that *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* use to convey embodied knowledge.

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This thesis is organised into two parts which roughly correspond to two broad ways of thinking about the epistemological potential of the non-fiction film. Each part is further subdivided into chapters which explore different historical moments/currents in non-fiction film in which the epistemological potential of the medium of film was conceived of in different ways. This provides a narrative that illustrates the ways in which ideas about the function of non-fiction cinema and its relationship to knowledge have shifted and developed over time. The first four chapters explore a number of important cinematic precursors to the *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* (and the work of the SEL more broadly), while the final chapter analyses these two films specifically. My aim is to demonstrate how the lab’s philosophy and aesthetic, as articulated in these two films, has been shaped by different understandings of the relationship between cinematic techniques and knowledge. In doing so I also want to suggest that these two SEL films themselves, along with their precursors, have helped to shape our understanding of what exactly knowledge is.

In Part 1, ‘Instrumental Film: Disembodied Knowledge’, I discuss those filmmakers who have conceived of the documentary as a primarily instrumental and purposive form of filmmaking.

These films typically evince a conception of knowledge as, ‘abstract, disembodied [and] based on generalisations and the typical’ (Nichols, 2010: 199-200). In Part 2, ‘Revelatory Film: Embodied Knowledge’, I look at those filmmakers who conceived of the medium of film as something more than a mere recording instrument and/or a conduit for disembodied, ‘propositional’ knowledge. These are filmmakers whose work has questioned the dominance of discursive, didactic styles of documentary and their emphasis on propositional forms of knowledge. Instead they have engaged in filmmaking practices that suggest that knowledge is not only that which can be put into words, but that it also extends to and includes those sensory aspects of our lives that may be difficult to express verbally (but which nonetheless forms an integral part of our lived experience).

The case studies addressed in this thesis are dealt with in chronological order, starting with early forms of ethnographic film and moving on through subsequent technological and epistemological developments within documentary film as the chapters progress. However, while the historical narrative that this study develops might appear to suggest a teleological progression from ‘less sophisticated’ conceptions of knowledge to ‘more sophisticated’ conceptions of knowledge, as I noted in **sections 2 and 3** of this introduction, one of the characteristics of documentary film that I wish to highlight through my analysis is that it is a complex, constantly evolving, constantly shifting mode of filmmaking practice. Ideas, styles and approaches shift in and out of popular use. Documentary forms and styles are iterative, cumulative and cyclical. So although the work I explore in Part 1 is largely of an instrumental, positivist character, and evinces a conception of knowledge as abstract and disembodied, and the work in Part 2 is largely representative of a more reflexive, subjective style of documentary filmmaking that evinces a conception of knowledge as concrete, embodied and experiential, there are many examples in which these clear distinctions break down.

For example John Grierson’s *Granton Trawler* (1934)—which, as Christopher Pavsek (2015) has noted, is a clear historical precursor to the SEL’s *Leviathan* (2012)—demonstrates qualities that are more akin to those described in later chapters, yet it was produced by a group of filmmakers whose work was typically didactic and discursive. Likewise in several of the chapters I address examples of films whose style and form undercuts or contradicts their ostensible epistemological function—limit cases in which, to paraphrase Faye Ginsburg’s description of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s film *First Days in the Life of a New Guinea Baby* (1952), the poetry fights with the science

(Ginsburg, 2003). In the next chapter, I explore the history and origins of ethnographic film. Here I emphasise a dynamic that has had a significant impact on the evolution of ethnographic film and on the epistemological assumptions underlying it: the question of whether it is 'art' or 'science'. In this chapter I am specifically concerned with the kinds of attitudes and assumptions that are bound up with considering ethnographic film a scientific endeavour, and the impact these assumptions have had on the way in which filmmakers have used the medium.

## PART ONE

### INSTRUMENTAL FILM: DISEMBODIED KNOWLEDGE

# CHAPTER ONE

## ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM AND THE CAMERA AS MICROSCOPE

Our primary goal is the production of knowledge.

- Jay Ruby, 'Eye-Witnessing: Humanism, Ethnography and Film' (1990: 16)

Scientific knowledge travels from one mind to another, transported by bodies as cargo is by ships.

- Bill Nichols, 'The Ethnographer's Tale' (1994b: 65)

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Many of the first individuals to use film and photography in the service of anthropology conceived of the camera as a tool analogous to instruments used in the natural sciences. They saw it as an objective recording device that could be used to capture 'data' which would then be subjected to analysis and interpretation. Through an overview of the history and origins of this conception of film within visual anthropology—with particular attention paid to the work of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson in the 1930s—in this chapter I explore the epistemological assumptions that underlie such a positivist and instrumentalist view of film. I suggest that this conception of the function and purpose of the camera predisposes filmmakers towards the use of particular cinematic techniques, and I argue that these techniques produce a filmic aesthetic that privileges the communication of what, following Bill Nichols, I call 'disembodied knowledge' (Nichols, 1994b). Although the assumptions around which instrumental/scientific conceptions of film are based are now largely viewed as naive and outmoded, this understanding of film represents an important stage in the history and development of ethnographic cinema. It represents a significant point on a continuum of shifting and evolving conceptions of the epistemological function of the moving image within anthropology. In particular, this conception of film remains significant as a paradigm that many later filmmakers, including the directors of *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*, have challenged.



Significantly, the view of ethnographic film as a scientific endeavour contrasts sharply with conceptions of ethnographic film as a fundamentally creative or even artistic activity. These two ways of seeing and understanding film are the root cause of a long running debate amongst anthropologists about how to use film within the discipline. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of this debate. I contend that the tension between notions of ethnographic film as ‘science’ and ethnographic film as ‘art’ has been both restrictive and productive. It has both stifled and encouraged different ways of thinking about the relationship between cinematic techniques and knowledge within ethnographic film.

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## 1. WAYS OF SEEING AND FORMAL STRATEGIES

As the co-directors of *Sweetgrass*, Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor remind us, there is a ‘mixed bag of assumptions’ that affect the way a filmmaker approaches their task. These assumptions have to do with the filmmaker’s relationships both to the realities they film and to their prospective viewers (Barbash and Taylor, 1997: 3). In other words, the ideas that filmmakers hold about the world and about the purpose and function of film have an impact on the kinds of films that they produce. One group of assumptions within this ‘mixed bag’ has to do with the ontological character of film. What is film? Is it a medium of artistic expression? A form of mass entertainment? Is it high or low culture? A tool for surveillance? A medium uniquely suited to conveying knowledge between different cultures? And if so, what kind of knowledge? The way in which one answers these questions has a profound impact on the way in which one uses the medium. Seeing film as a tool for surveillance, for instance, clearly suggests a very different way of using it than if one sees it as a medium of artistic expression. In *The Ethnographer’s Eye: Ways of Seeing in Anthropology* (2001), Anna Grimshaw uses the term ‘metaphysic’ to describe these kinds of assumptions, and the set of beliefs by which anthropologists approach the world (Grimshaw, 2001: 7-8).

For Grimshaw, the term ‘metaphysic’ invokes ‘vision’ in the metaphorical sense—implying a certain way of looking at and interpreting the world. As such it is close to the notion of a ‘worldview’. Within this ‘metaphysic’ we can include Barbash and Castaing-Taylor’s mixed bag of

assumptions. How does a filmmaker conceive of the world? How do they view reality? Do they see the world as logical, coherent, ordered and ultimately knowable? Or, do they believe the world is chaotic, fragmented, in constant flux and in some sense fundamentally unknowable? These kinds of assumptions and beliefs underpin and influence the kind of methodological strategies and formal techniques that a filmmaker uses. Or as Grimshaw puts it, an ethnographer's 'metaphysic' is an interpretation of the world that finds expression through 'the substance and form of [their] anthropological work' (Grimshaw, 2001: 8). There is a reflexive interplay between form and worldview. A 'metaphysic' or 'way of seeing' anticipates the use of certain formal strategies, while at the same time, Grimshaw argues, the 'techniques employed in the exploration of the world shape the metaphysic by which the ethnographer interprets that world' (Grimshaw, 2001: 8).

The American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead's metaphysic, her way of seeing the discipline of anthropology, was one that saw it as a process of accumulating scientific knowledge. For Mead, anthropology was a process by which the world is rendered knowable and comprehensible. Mead saw filmmaking in the service of anthropology as a fundamentally scientific endeavour. This had an impact on the kinds of cinematic techniques that she deemed appropriate—or indeed, inappropriate. The approach that Mead and her then husband, the English anthropologist Gregory Bateson, took to the filmmaking process during their fieldwork in Bali and New Guinea in the 1930s extends directly from a view of the world in which all observable phenomena can be made comprehensible, logical, knowable, if only they can be studied intently and thoroughly. In Mead and Bateson's case, this meant producing as much ostensibly 'objective' photographic material documenting the behaviours that they were interested in as possible. They undertook this extensive documentation under the assumption that this material would provide the basis for an analysis and interpretation of Balinese culture.

### 1.1. Knowing from a Distance

Within the empirical/rational framework exemplified by Mead and Bateson's approach to film and photography, visual material is seen as a precursor to scientific knowledge. It is treated as raw 'data', yet to be placed within an interpretative/analytical frame. Or as David MacDougall puts it, within this understanding of film and photography, visual material are treated 'chiefly as adjuncts to

formulating knowledge at a higher level of abstraction' (MacDougall, 2006: 6). As I will demonstrate, this understanding of the purpose of film as 'raw' information or data produces a commitment to a 'plain style' of filmmaking that disavows aesthetic intent. In addition to this commitment to 'plain style', this understanding of film as data also produced an adherence to what could be described as an 'aesthetic of wholeness'. For instance, writing some decades after Mead and Bateson's project but embodying a similar attitude and reflecting the same kinds of assumptions that informed their approach to filmmaking, Karl Heider (1976/2006) argued that ethnographic films should show 'whole bodies' and 'whole acts'. 'Close-up shots of faces should be used very sparingly', he writes, 'for entire bodies of people at work or play or rest are more revealing and interesting than body fragments' (Heider, 1976/2006: 125). I will discuss Heider's rules for ethnographic filmmaking, and the parallels that his prescriptions have with Mead and Bateson's approach, in more detail in **section 4**.

The distance required to film whole bodies creates a detachment from the textures of lived experience, from the flesh of the world seen in close-up. Films produced according to a holistic, 'whole bodies', approach are distant and impersonal. Whereas by contrast, as I will demonstrate in later chapters, the close-up and the 'corresponding aesthetic of the fragment' (Barbash and Taylor, 2007: 8) are devices which provide a more embodied, intimate, experiential perspective. In addition to a detached filming style, ethnographic films that adhere to the holistic approach typically also make heavy use of a style of voice-over commentary that Bill Nichols describes as a 'disembodied [...] voice of authority [...] that speaks on behalf of unrestricted ethnographic knowledge' (Nichols, 1994b: 65). This detached, impersonal, omniscient voice which 'has no body [...] projects itself from here to there as the voice of reason, personified only by the "grain" of the individual voice used to represent it' (Nichols, 1994b: 65). This is a technique that, as Nichols suggests, is emblematic of the mind/body split epitomised by the scientific production of knowledge—wherein 'detachment from [...] the object of study allows science, or ethnographic film, to disavow its attachment to the body' (Nichols, 1994b: 68). Many ethnographic films reflect this detachment on another level too. The ethnographic process has often been seen as one of streamlining and refining (from a kind of chaos to a kind of order) in a way that requires a certain level of detachment from one's lived, embodied experience. As Nichols notes, many ethnographic films and written ethnographies attempt to 'resolve an acute contradiction between impersonal, scientific knowledge

and the personal experience on which it is based' (Nichols, 1994b: 65). Or as Grimshaw puts it, the ethnographic process is assumed to be 'a largely mechanical exercise by which the emotional messiness of fieldwork [is] translated into the neat categories of an academic argument' (Grimshaw, 2001: 3).

This produces a kind of knowledge that, in Nichols' memorable words, 'travels from one mind to another, transported by bodies as cargo is by ships' (Nichols, 1994b: 65). Nichols quotes from the celebrated Vietnamese filmmaker and theorist Trinh Minh-ha in order to elucidate the difference between this kind of 'disembodied' knowledge and an experiential or 'embodied' knowledge. Trinh writes:

The words passed down from mouth to ear (one sexual part to another sexual part), womb to womb, body to body are the remembered ones. S/He whose belly cannot contain (also read "retain") words, says a Malinke song, will succeed at nothing. The further they move away from the belly, the more liable they are to be corrupted. (Words that come from the MIND and are passed on directly 'from mind to mind' are, consequently, highly suspect...). (Trinh, 1989: 136, emphasis in original)

As Nichols notes, the kind of knowledge that Trinh describes here requires 'different forms and styles of representation from those that have [typically] characterised ethnographic film' (Nichols, 1994b: 65). In Chapters 4 and 5 I will argue that modes of expression common to experimental film practices have offered precisely the kinds of forms and styles of representation that are necessary to communicate this kind of knowledge. These practices have challenged the broad realist paradigm that has dominated visual anthropology throughout the discipline's history and offered cinematic representations of the world that are more evocative, subjective and phenomenal.

## 1.2. From Data to Documentary

In total, seven short films were produced from the material that Mead and Bateson shot during their fieldwork in Bali and New Guinea between 1936 and 1939, but none of these were edited until the early 1950s. The footage on which the films are based was originally intended solely as a visual record of Balinese behaviour. It was produced with the intention of creating an archive of material that would serve as the basis for Mead and Bateson's anthropological analysis. This analysis took place as soon as the pair returned to America, and they first began to communicate their findings

through lectures and public presentations in the 1940s. According to Ira Jacknis, both Mead and Bateson would show informally edited selections of their footage during these lectures, using material that was chosen to illustrate the theoretical points that they wanted to make (Jacknis, 1988: 170). It is significant that the first use of this material involved a verbal commentary in which Mead and Bateson would outline their interpretations and analysis of this ‘data’. Later, when Mead began to edit their footage into the seven discrete documentary films for wider distribution, she would also rely heavily on the use of verbal commentary.

As in their lectures, Mead’s voice-over provides the interpretative frame through which to understand the images we see in the films. The voice-over commentary ‘recuperates images that defy mastery’ (Nichols, 1991: 223). It is the ‘explanatory net’ through which ‘those strange and mysterious acts to which the image and its synchronous sound bear witness’ are made comprehensible (Nichols, 1991: 223). It is my aim in this chapter to show how techniques such as the disembodied, explanatory voice-over—as well as the other ‘holistic’ cinematic techniques associated with the filmmaking methodology that Mead and Bateson utilised during their fieldwork in Bali—produces an aesthetic in the finished films that privileges the communication of ‘disembodied’ knowledge. Before I discuss Mead and Bateson’s work in more detail though, I want to explore the origins of this understanding of film as ‘data’, and start to unpack some of the assumptions that underlie it.

## 2. VISION, KNOWLEDGE, OBJECTIVITY AND THE CAMERA

In Western culture, sight has traditionally enjoyed a privileged status as a source of knowledge about the world. This association is closely tied up with a rational-empirical scientific paradigm. As Paul Stoller notes, the link emerged during the Enlightenment, when visual ‘sense data’ played a crucial role in the emerging scientific culture (Stoller, 1989/2010: 7). Stoller contends that ‘the emphasis on empirical observation raised sight to a privileged position, soon replacing the bias of the “lower senses” (especially smell and touch)’ that had dominated throughout the Middle Ages (Stoller, 1989/2010: 7). Crucially, the objectivity and intellectual detachment prized by the scientific method becomes possible with a sense (sight) which is itself distancing; unlike touch, which

requires direct contact between the object and the perceiver, vision separates ‘spectator and spectacle’ (Classen, 1993: 6).<sup>18</sup>

The notion that to *see* is to *know* is also, as Grimshaw notes, ‘encapsulated in the commitment of modern ethnographers to going to “see” for themselves’ (Grimshaw, 2001: 7). By the beginning of the twentieth century, anthropologists had begun to reject the discipline’s previous reliance on ‘hearsay’ (i.e. the reports of ‘untrained’ observers) and were conducting fieldwork-based research for themselves. It became increasingly important for anthropologists to collect their own ‘data’ in the field, and to build their theories and analysis around this first-hand information. This direct observation served as a marker of authenticity and authority: ‘What the ethnographer saw himself or herself in the field later became an ultimate standard of proof, they had, after all, uniquely “been there”’ (Grimshaw, 2001: 20-21). As a result of this new emphasis on direct, first-hand observation, these early fieldworkers ‘reaffirmed the association of vision and knowledge, enshrining it at the heart of a new ethnographic project’ (Grimshaw, 2001: 7).

Within this ocularcentric landscape, the camera was initially seen as a device with enormous potential for anthropology (Henley, 2000: 207-208). At the time, the discipline was deeply committed to a rational-empirical scientific paradigm. As Peter Loizos notes, ‘The dominant epistemological assumptions about how [anthropological] research was to be done were empiricist and scientific in the sense that to better understand cultures it was thought necessary to study them more intensively, to collect more data, by ever more rigorous research methods’ (Loizos, 1993: 16). Because the camera offered a vision that was, in certain ways, superior to our own, it appeared to offer a promising new means of knowing and understanding the world more rigorously (Ruby, 2000). Specifically, what it seemed to offer for those committed to an empirical scientific paradigm was the promise of an objective image. Or, in the words of Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, an image ‘uncontaminated by interpretation’ (Daston and Galison, 1992: 81).

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<sup>18</sup> The prominence of vision as a source of knowledge has also been attributed to the rise of literacy, and the corresponding shift towards sight as the principal means of acquiring knowledge within literate societies. Donald Lowe, for instance, attributes the decline in the other senses and the ascendance of visualism to the rise of typographic technology in literate societies, in which ‘a new perceptual field, constituted by typographic culture, the primacy of sight, and the order of representation-in-space [was] super-imposed over the previous ones’ (Lowe, 1982: 13). The association is also embodied in the fact that sight provides the basis for many of the non-verbal ways in which we understand and conceive of the world. Here one need only think of charts, illustrations, maps and diagrams—from anatomical sketches to visual representations of cycles and processes in industry and the natural world.

The problem of objectivity was a central concern of nineteenth century scientific investigation. As Grimshaw notes, investigators were becoming increasingly worried about the influence they might have on their object of investigation: “Policing the subjective” was an intellectual, practical and moral problem; and in a Victorian world of self-restraint and technological innovation, machines offered to minimise intervention’ (Grimshaw, 2001: 21). So photography, as a process of mechanical reproduction, became a means to, and a symbol of, a kind of ‘noninterventionist objectivity’ (Daston and Galison, 1992: 120). The photograph became the emblem for all aspects of this type of objectivity:

This was not because the photograph was necessarily truer to nature than hand-made images—many paintings bore a closer resemblance to their subject matter than early photographs, if only because they used colour—but rather because the camera apparently eliminated human agency. Nonintervention, not verisimilitude, lay at the heart of mechanical objectivity. And this is why mechanically produced images captured its message best. (Daston and Galison, 1992: 120)

Early enthusiasm about the potential of photographic technologies within anthropology was largely based on this perception of the camera. Anthropologists shared the widespread belief in what Dai Vaughan has called the ‘transcendental impartiality’ of the camera (Vaughan, 1999: 26). Their faith in film’s power as a means of recording human behaviour in a manner uncoloured by the vagaries of individual subjectivity, and the perceived benefits of such a power, was directly tied to the notion of the discipline as a science. As Durlington and Ruby note, ‘insofar as the assumed goal of social science research was then to obtain “objective data”, these media appeared to offer unimpeachable evidence’ (Durlington and Ruby, 2011: 193). For the ‘armchair’ anthropologists of the mid-nineteenth century in particular—who were becoming increasingly troubled by their reliance on the reports of untrained observers—the photographic image provided visible evidence against which other reports could be judged (Grimshaw, 2001: 21). As I will demonstrate in the following section, in which I discuss the origins of ethnographic film and further explore some of the assumptions underlying the conception of film as ‘data’ within visual anthropology, the belief that the technology that records images makes it possible for researchers to obtain objective, empirical evidence has existed in one form or another since the advent of photographic technology (Durlington and Ruby, 2011: 193).

## 2.1. Ethnographic Film and the Camera as Microscope

As early as 1894 the nascent medium of cinema—in the form of Thomas Edison’s kinetograph—was being used to record images of people ‘culturally exotic relative to the filmmakers’ (Henley, 2013a: 309). In that year a group of Sioux were filmed performing two ceremonial dances in Edison’s famous Black Maria studio. No longer than 30 seconds each, the two short films depict a ‘ghost dance’ and a ‘buffalo dance’ respectively. Both dances were orchestrated especially for Edison’s camera. In fact, the Sioux featured were members of Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show and Edison’s films were produced, at least in part, for promotional purposes prior to the troupe setting off on a tour of Europe (Henley, 2013a: 309).<sup>19</sup> The following year the French physician Félix Louis Regnault filmed a Wolof woman making pots at an ethnographic exhibition in Paris (de Brigard, 1975/2003). Then in 1898, the British anthropologists Alfred Court Haddon and W. H. R. Rivers shot around four minutes of material on their expedition with the University of Cambridge to the Torres Strait Islands. The footage features a series of dances, as well as a group of islanders in the process of lighting a fire. These activities were also organised specifically for the camera, though with a different purpose in mind to Edison’s footage. In Haddon’s case the camera was explicitly employed as a scientific instrument ‘gathering visual data for later analysis’ (Henley, 2013a: 310). As a result of this emphasis, the Haddon material is generally regarded as the first sustained instance of the use of moving image technology in the service of anthropology (Jacknis, 1988; Grimshaw, 2001; MacDougall, 2006).

It is revealing that the origins of ethnographic film are to be found simultaneously in the worlds of commercial entertainment and scientific endeavour. One could argue—in a similar manner to the way that Siegfried Kracauer (1960) famously suggested that early cinema contained the kernel of what would become the fiction film and the documentary in the shape of the actuality films of the Lumière brothers and the fantastical work of Georges Méliès—that these proto-ethnographic films anticipate and exemplify one of the defining features of ethnographic cinema: the tension that has existed within the form between two very different ways of thinking about the purpose and function

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<sup>19</sup> Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show was a popular travelling show that featured re-enactments of events from the United States’ recent past, focusing in particular on the history of the American frontier. Alongside these historical re-enactments the shows typically also featured displays of horsemanship and marksmanship, as well as short vignettes depicting the cultures and customs of Native American peoples (McNenly, 2015).



of film.<sup>20</sup> Namely, is it a creative, artistic medium, or a tool for scientific inquiry? Broadly speaking, Haddon and Regnault's contributions prefigure the work of individuals like Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, while the Edison material anticipates a broader current of films within the documentary tradition that deal with subjects of interest to anthropologists but in ways that many would consider improper or insufficiently 'ethnographic'.

Significantly, the camera was just one 'instrument' amongst a range of other scientific devices that Haddon and the members of the Torres Strait expedition brought with them. As Grimshaw notes, many anthropologists at this time carried the techniques and technologies of late-Victorian science with them, hoping to emulate a newly developed 'laboratory culture' in the field (Grimshaw, 2001: 21). Regnault also conceived of the camera in these terms, regarding it as a 'laboratory instrument that could fix transient human events for further analysis' (MacDougall, 1978: 406). He even published a scientific paper based on his film recording, and argued that ethnography would only achieve 'the precision of a science' through the use of such instruments (MacDougall, 1978: 406). The extensive use of the camera as an instrument or research tool within anthropology never quite materialised in the way that Haddon and Regnault hoped. As MacDougall notes, from about 1930 onwards there was a general decline in the use of photographs in anthropology in this manner (MacDougall, 1998: 65). But as Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's Bali project demonstrates, Haddon and Regnault's faith in the camera's potential has nevertheless intermittently been echoed in the aspirations that certain anthropologists have had for film throughout the discipline's history.

For instance, writing at the height of a renewed enthusiasm for this 'research film' (Durlington and Ruby, 2011) or 'documentation-realist' (Loizos, 1993: 17) approach to ethnographic film, Timothy Asch, John Marshall and Peter Spier (1973) outlined what they believed were the potential uses of the motion picture camera within anthropology. In their paper, entitled 'Ethnographic Film: Structure & Function', they also framed their understanding of the camera in explicitly scientific and instrumental terms. The rather dry title of their paper is itself revealing: it reflects this idea of a

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<sup>20</sup> Kracauer's famous claim, attractive in its simplicity as an explanatory historical narrative, has been repeated frequently. But as Gunning (1986) and others have shown us, it is a narrative that rests on a false dichotomy. Jean-Luc Godard, who in his own work has often emphasised the arbitrary nature of distinctions between documentary and fiction film, articulated the core of this critique as follows: 'A distinction is usually drawn between Lumière and Méliès. Lumière, they say, is documentary, and Méliès is fantasy. But today, what do we see when we watch their films? We see Méliès filming the reception of the King of Yugoslavia by the President of the Republic. A newsreel, in other words. And at the same time we find Lumière filming a family card game in the *Bouvard and Pécuchet* manner. In other words, fiction' (Godard quoted in Ray, 2001: 114).

discipline still largely committed to a rational-scientific paradigm—one which saw itself as an empirical science, and prized objectivity and neutrality over subjectivity and partiality (Loizos, 1993: 17). The language they use in the paper further emphasises this attitude: ‘The camera’, they write, ‘can be to the anthropologist what the telescope is to the astronomer, or what the microscope is to the biologist’ (Asch et al., 1973: 185). Again the camera is seen, quite literally in this case, as a tool or instrument analogous to those used in other scientific disciplines.<sup>21</sup> As Eliot Weinberger notes, this is a rather scary comment which ‘assumes that the matter on the other side of the ethnographic lens is as imperturbable as galaxies or amoeba’ (Weinberger, 1992: 38). Here we can see how quickly questions of impartiality and objectivity slide into what Harald Prins calls a kind of ‘(neo)colonial objectification of the “Other”’ (Prins, 1997: 283).

Within this approach, film footage is seen as an objective audiovisual record of human behaviour with a direct, indexical link to reality. The purpose of the camera within this positivist/empirical-rational framework is to mimetically record that reality as it exists before (what was assumed to be) the device’s neutrally observing lens (Prins, 1997: 283). There are a number of assumptions tied up in thinking about the camera in this way. Principally, it reflects an epistemology that asserts that the world is empirically observable, and that it is possible for that world to be objectively and accurately represented (Loizos, 1993: 9). Such a view implies a faith in ‘a truthful reality, “out there” - a reality distinct from that of the viewer and filmmaker’ (Russell, 1999: 12). Loizos argues that both ‘epistemologically and ideologically there was an innocent simplicity’ in how the practitioners of this kind of approach conceptualised what they were doing (Loizos, 1993: 16). Though as Prins notes, today this approach is likely to be viewed as neither simple nor innocent, but rather as a kind of “naive positivism” (Prins, 1997: 283).

Today visual anthropology has almost entirely abandoned the emphasis on scientific objectivity—and on the impartiality of the camera—that characterised these earlier efforts within the field. Such

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<sup>21</sup> In explicitly drawing a parallel between the camera and research tools associated with the natural sciences, Asch, Marshall and Spier were, in part, attempting to justify their use of photographic technology within the discipline. The costs of filmmaking in the 1970s were considerably higher than they are today since the advent of video and digital technologies. This framing of the camera as a scientific instrument was therefore partly felt necessary in order to justify the medium’s expense. Furthermore, as Weinberger notes, ethnographic filmmakers have had a tendency to ‘adopt a more scientific-than-thou’ attitude in order to ‘prove their [anthropological] mettle’ (Weinberger, 1992: 38). This was true of Mead and Bateson in the 1930s. As I will demonstrate in section 3, they were possessed by an impulse to film in depth and in detail in a way that, as Fatimah Tobing Rony suggests, was motivated in part by a desire to counter criticism that Mead’s anthropology was ‘journalistic’ (Rony, 2006: 11).

concerns are increasingly seen as part of what Silvio Carta calls a ‘worn-out nineteenth century topic’ (Carta, 2015: 3). As Marcus Banks argues, it would be difficult to find ‘any scholar within the past 10 years or so who unambiguously endorsed a straightforward empiricist-realist approach to film’ (Banks, 2007: 61). In this respect visual anthropology has been heavily influenced by post-modern and reflexive theoretical and conceptual developments within the broader discipline. The dismantling of written anthropology in the *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986) critique demonstrated that scientific frameworks are just as prone to generalization, manipulation and bias as non-professional accounts. Both ethnographic films and written ethnographies are increasingly understood to be ‘provisional texts suggesting plural and contested realities’ (Loizos, 1993: 8). For instance, as my analyses of the two films in Chapter 5 will demonstrate, both *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* do not attempt to engage in an ostensibly ‘objective’ and detached documentation of the phenomena they explore. Instead these films are aware of, and embrace, their subjectivity. Nevertheless, the scientific paradigm fundamentally influenced the way ethnographic cinema has developed. It still remains a significant point of reference for theorists and practitioners. Indeed, as David MacDougall suggests, many anthropologists ‘still feel caught between the possibility of conceptual advances from visual anthropology and the more conservative paradigms of a positivist scientific tradition’ (MacDougall, 2006: 224).

Crucially, adherents of this approach advocated the use of certain cinematic techniques over others, emphasising audiovisual strategies that are supposedly more ‘natural’ or ‘realist’. They also stressed the need to record images which include as much ‘information’ or ‘data’ as possible within each shot. As I noted in **section 1.1.**, often this meant a commitment to an aesthetic of wholeness. In other words, a commitment to capturing the ‘whole’ of an action or scene—using medium or long shots, and long takes. As Prins notes, the documentation approach ‘implies a detached/objectifying shooting style, preferably with wide angle lens and long shots, and certainly no montage’ (Prins, 1997: 283). As I will demonstrate in **section 3**, these are precisely the kind of techniques Mead and Bateson utilised during their fieldwork in Bali in the 1930s. As well as suggesting the use of certain cinematic techniques, this conception of ethnographic film also saw a marked emphasis towards the exploration of particular kinds of phenomena.

## 2.2. Motion Capture

Many of the first scientific activities involving photographic technologies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were motivated by a desire to record and analyse movement. These activities provided visible evidence of a particular natural phenomenon (the motion of humans and animals) that could be studied in detail, and in a manner unavailable to the unaided human observer. As Jay Ruby notes, ‘protocinematic machines’ were capturing ‘the subtleties and complexities of movement that were beyond the range of human vision’ (Ruby, 2000: 41-42). For instance, in 1878 Eadweard Muybridge famously made a major contribution to both anatomical science and the evolution of cinema with his images of a running horse. These first images were captured by a row of cameras that were triggered as the horse ran past. Muybridge would go on to produce thousands of similar motion studies using his multiple camera set up. His pioneering images of humans and animals in motion were an important precursor to the invention of cinema, and they inspired contemporaries like the French physiologist Étienne-Jules Marey to develop similar technology to record and analyse movement for more explicitly scientific purposes (Collier and Collier, 1986: 140). Muybridge and Marey’s work had a profound impact on the contemporary imagination, shaping society’s understanding of vision, the body, nature, art and science. Their work also influenced, and continues to influence, a broad range of filmmakers, artists and designers.

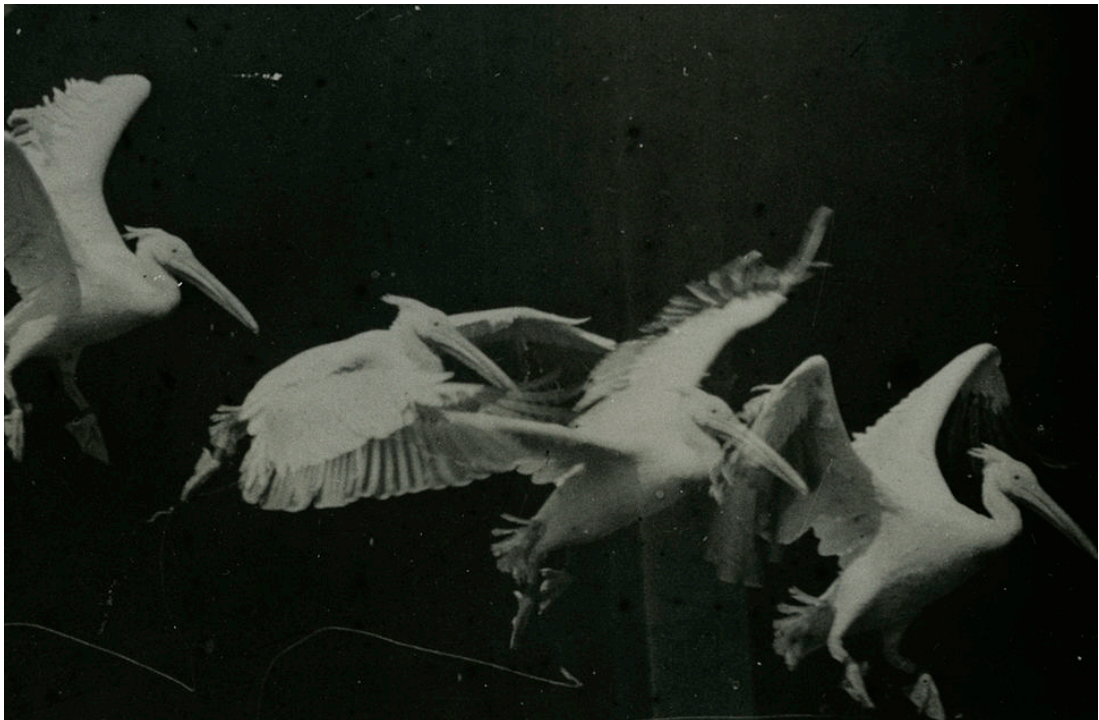


Fig. 4. Chronophotography, the flight of the pelican.

Étienne-Jules Marey (1883)

Muybridge and Marey's images allowed those interested in human and animal locomotion to study their object of investigation more intently and rigorously. Their work was part of a wider societal interest in the nineteenth century in technology as a means of exploring, understanding and, perhaps ultimately, controlling the natural world. There was a profound optimism that science and technology would enable humanity to, as Ruby puts it, 'open up the mysteries of the universe' (Ruby, 2000: 42).<sup>22</sup> Significantly, Muybridge and Marey's focus on motion is also shared by many of the efforts to use film within the discipline of anthropology too. The way people move was seen as an important locus of cultural expression by many of the researchers involved in studies of human behaviour using the motion picture camera (Ruby, 2000). This is because, Ruby argues, 'movement, space, and time are the cultural variables for which the camera is best suited' (Ruby, 2000: 47). Film therefore promised to be a particularly invaluable tool for scholars with an interest in 'the cultural mechanics of body movement, locomotion, motor skills, gesture, posture, dance, the display of emotion and space use' (Ruby, 2000: 47). The advantage of film in the eyes of such researchers was clear. It offered the ability to produce what John and Malcolm Collier call 'flowing records of culture and behaviour through time and space' (Collier and Collier, 1986: 139). Film can freeze, reverse, slow down, and speed up behaviour. Moving images were also attractive because they are infinitely repeatable. Bodily movement can be replayed over and over again and subjected to intense scrutiny without ever altering the original action.

This understanding of the camera's potential as a tool for studying human motion is perhaps best exemplified by the work of Arnold Gesell, an American psychologist known for his research into child development. Gesell developed a methodology for the use of film and photography in the 1930s that he christened 'cinemanalysis':

Cinema analysis [...] is an objective method of behaviour research which was made possible only by the invention of the flexible film and other modern photographic techniques. [It] is a form of biopsy which requires no removal of body tissue from the living subject [...] It permits us to bring this behaviour into the laboratory for searching dissection. (Gesell et al., 1934: 22)

A later article expanded upon the implications of this scientific and instrumentalist conception of film:

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<sup>22</sup> Grimshaw suggests that the same impulse also motivated the Lumière brothers, who she describes as 'late-Victorian bourgeois gentlemen [...] committed to science and technology', and men who 'believed in progress and in the ever-increasing knowability of the world' (Grimshaw, 2001: 18).

Bodily tissue suffers from the scalpel, but the integrity and conformation of behaviour cannot be destroyed by repeated observation. A behaviour form can be dissected over and over again in increasing detail without loss of form. (Gesell, 1935/1991: 6)

Gesell's diagnostic vision of filmmaking was a major influence on Margaret Mead and the filmmaking methodology she and Bateson utilised in Bali (Lakoff, 1996). Like Gesell, Mead and Bateson were also interested in bodily movement. All of their research evinced what Ira Jacknis calls a 'marked non-verbal bias [...] amenable to a study of gesture and interpersonal relations, recorded photographically' (Jacknis, 1988: 162). As Andrew Lakoff notes, their study depended on two premises: 'first, that a diagnosis of a culture's psychic structure might be made from an analysis of its members' bodies [and] second, that such an analysis could be accomplished in absentia, from observation of photographic records of these bodies' (Lakoff, 1996: 2).

### 3. MEAD AND BATESON IN BALI

Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson undertook their fieldwork on the Indonesian island of Bali between 1936 and 1939.<sup>23</sup> During their time there the pair produced a prodigious amount of visual material: around 25,000 still photographs and 22,000 feet of 16mm film (Jacknis, 1988: 162). The footage they shot during this period was not originally intended to be edited into a documentary, rather it was initially produced as a filmic record of human behaviour. Mead and Bateson explicitly framed their work within an empirical-rational scientific model. They drew a clear distinction between the filmed footage, which was treated as data, and their interpretation or analysis of this data (i.e. their findings). Upon returning from the field in 1939, the pair began to analyse their material. As I noted in **section 1.2.**, throughout the 1940s they used their film footage in public presentations of their anthropological findings and theoretical arguments, initially using informally edited selections of this 'data' to illustrate their lectures. Meanwhile, the still photographs became the basis for a book entitled *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* (Bateson and Mead, 1942). Then by 1950, over a decade after the footage was originally shot, Mead began to edit the moving images they had recorded into discrete, structured films for wider distribution.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Their fieldwork took place during two extended visits. The first began in March 1936 and lasted two years, the second began in early 1939 and lasted six weeks. In order to be able to compare and contrast their observations in Bali they also spent eight months in New Guinea in 1938 (Jacknis, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> By this point Bateson apparently lost interest and took no further part in the post-production process. The resulting documentary films were therefore authored principally by Mead (Henley, 2013b: 86).

Although Haddon and the members of the Torres straits expedition had pioneered the use of the camera in the field, Mead and Bateson were among the first anthropologists to use photographic technologies as a core part of their methodology, and in a way that emphatically stressed their potential as a primary recording method (Collier and Collier, 1986; Jacknis, 1988). It is for this reason that Ira Jacknis argues that their work ‘began the field of visual anthropology’ (Jacknis, 1988: 160). Jacknis’ (1988) exhaustive overview of Mead and Bateson’s Bali project was the first in depth discussion of this work, and his article remains a valuable source of reference. However, he largely approaches their project from the same perspective that the pair themselves did. That is to say, as Paul Henley puts it, ‘as merely different aspects of a systematic methodology based on the use of visual media as recording instruments’ (Henley, 2013b: 76). For instance, in one section of his article Jacknis assesses the effectiveness of the strategies Mead and Bateson used to alleviate bias and ‘selectivity’ in their filmed record (Jacknis, 1988).

Other critical commentary has stressed the project’s significance as an important landmark within the history of ethnographic film. Henley (2013b) for instance, argues that the seven films that were produced from the Bali material represent an interesting transitional phase between two conceptions of ethnographic film:

while some of the films look back to the period of the 1930s and before, when film was conceived of primarily as a means of supposedly objective scientific documentation, others anticipate, almost despite the intentions of their authors, the event-based forms of documentary representation, structured by a real or constructed chronological narrative, that began to emerge in ethnographic filmmaking later in the 1950s. (Henley, 2013b: 77)

The films have also been critiqued from a post-colonial perspective. Fatimah Tobing Rony (2006) argues that the most widely seen of the Mead-Bateson films, *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1952), creates a vision of ‘extreme otherness’ that presents the Balinese as ‘pathological, creatures of an erotic, exotic past, presented by the camera and the voice-over from a geographical and temporal distance’ (Rony, 2006: 5). Drawing on this earlier work, my aim here is to conduct an analysis of the relationship between the formal strategies used in the edited films and the kind of knowledge that they convey. These formal strategies are of course inextricably related to the methodology Mead and Bateson adopted in order to produce the visual material which the films are based on, and this

methodology was in turn closely related to the pair's theoretical/anthropological interests. So although my interest is not in the ethnographic content of the films or the anthropological validity of their theories, a brief gloss of the theoretical underpinnings of their project will be useful at this point.

### 3.1. Personality and Culture

Mead and Bateson's focus while in Bali was the relationship between culture and personality. Specifically, they believed that parent-child interactions, and particular child-rearing practices common in Balinese culture, accounted for key aspects of Balinese character, as well as for 'the tenor of Balinese social life generally' (Henley, 2013b: 81). For instance, the way a mother bathed her child—the way she moved her body and the way she interacted physically with the child during the bathing process—was thought to be indicative of broader characteristics typical of the culture in question. Before arriving in Bali, Mead posited that Balinese culture exhibited 'schizophrenic' qualities, and she believed that the origins of this pathology were to be found in early parent-child interactions. Rony notes that, 'using psychoanalysis (although they were not trained in that field), Mead and Bateson laid the blame for schizophrenia of Balinese culture on the mother, who they saw as frigid and cruel' (Rony, 2006: 9). They also believed that these parent-child interactions, and the schizophrenic tendencies associated with them, were played out in formal ceremonial activities such as the theatrical performance documented in *Trance and Dance in Bali*. It is worth noting that although Mead and Bateson's ideas were initially fairly widely accepted within the discipline, they have subsequently been roundly critiqued from a variety of perspectives.<sup>25</sup> However discredited their theoretical findings though, the project remains a fascinating example of a particular vision of ethnographic filmmaking. A core part of this vision was a filmmaking methodology that extended directly from this belief that certain cultural characteristics could be explained through an analysis of bodily movement and physical interactions.

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<sup>25</sup> As Henley notes, 'not only has the wider Personality and Culture theoretical paradigm that they were working in been largely discredited but their own particular findings have been criticised on numerous grounds. It has been claimed that their conclusions are based on an inadequate understanding of schizophrenia and an unwarranted extrapolation from the features of an individual condition to a collective cultural phenomenon [...] Their view that Balinese mothers did not attend to their children has [also] been described as "patently absurd"' (Henley, 2013b: 82).



### 3.2. We Treated Our Cameras as Recording Instruments

Like many investigators at the time, Mead and Bateson conceived of the camera as an instrument of ‘non-interventionist’ objectivity. Mead in particular felt that film and photography had a significant advantage over the anthropology’s primary method of documentation (written notes taken in the field) because the images captured by the camera were, she believed, not filtered through the subjectivity of the individual doing the observing (Mead, 1975/2003).<sup>26</sup> At the time they undertook their fieldwork they also both believed firmly in the need for ‘objective’ data. In *Balinese Character*, Bateson describes their approach as follows:

We tried to use the still and the moving picture cameras to get a record of Balinese behaviour, and this is a very different matter from the preparation of “documentary” film or photographs. We tried to shoot what happened normally and spontaneously, rather than to decide upon norms and then get the Balinese to go through these behaviours in suitable lighting. We treated our cameras in the field as recording instruments, not as devices for illustrating our theses. (Bateson and Mead, 1942: 49)

As Lakoff suggests, this use of photography ‘may be read as the production of anthropological relics, as sacred sources of ethnographic knowledge’ (Lakoff, 1996: 13). Mead and Bateson understood visual anthropology as a two step process—getting ‘information *on* film’ and then getting ‘information *off* film’ (Collier and Collier, 1986: xiii, emphasis in original). Their intention was to use their cameras in as ‘objective’ a manner as possible so that the material they produced could be used, even by other scholars not in the field with them, as the ‘basis for the elaboration of theoretical arguments’ (Henley, 2013b: 101). To this end, much of the pair’s photographic material was produced through a method of detached observation that Mead called ‘running field notes’ (Jacknis, 1988: 163). This was an approach that was designed to document as meticulously as possible every aspect of a particular occurrence without altering the ‘natural’ behaviour of those being filmed.

Jacknis describes the results of this method as ‘essentially a chronological narrative of observations’ (Jacknis, 1988: 163). Typically working in 45 minute bursts, Mead would take constant written notes while observing a parent and child interacting with one another. Meanwhile, Bateson would

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<sup>26</sup> In a much quoted article written in the 1970s, Mead predicted that the ‘objective’ practice of filming could replace the ‘subjective’ practice of taking written notes in the field. She saw the anthropologist as an imperfect instrument, their ‘hopelessly inadequate’ field notes subject to observer bias (Mead, 1975/2003).

use either a still or motion picture camera to photograph the scene. Their Balinese assistant, I Madé Kalér, would also take notes and act as an interpreter. Henley calls this process a kind of ‘continuous textual tracking’ of behaviour (Henley, 2013b: 85). Alongside the ethnographer’s observations these notes would also include contextual information such as, ‘the day of observation (and of the write-up), a summary title of the action, a complete list of Balinese present, the kind of photography used (cine or still, with identifying numbers), and the general cultural themes or behaviours exhibited’ (Jacknis, 1988: 163). Their written observations also featured a running time note along the side, recorded with synchronised watches. As Rony notes, such an approach reflects the extraordinary belief that it is possible to understand a people through ‘the copious use of recording: textual, photographic, and filmic’ (Rony, 2006: 11). During this process the pair apparently also went to great lengths to not influence the behaviour of those they were filming. They followed what Andrew Lakoff calls the ‘natural history approach’, in which ‘the investigator is minimally present [and] effaces himself or his camera as much as possible’ (Lakoff, 1996: 11). For instance, Bateson would typically try to shoot without drawing attention to himself, apparently sometimes ‘going so far as to use a right-angle viewfinder if he suspected that the subject would object’ (Henley, 2013b: 85). Such a strategy now sounds deeply problematic and unethical, but as Henley notes, ‘given the ideology associated with detached scientific observation in that era, Bateson is unlikely to have felt any qualms about it’ (Henley, 2013b: 85). Crucially, this kind of detachment was seen as a prerequisite for ethnographic knowledge, which, as Nichols notes, must ‘know/possess at a distance’ (Nichols, 1991: 221).

Though each harboured opposing ambiguities within their thoughts on the subject, Mead’s faith in the camera as a neutral recording instrument seemed to increase as she grew older. Jacknis notes that while Bateson ‘gradually retreated from empiricism, Mead seems to have accentuated her faith in it’ (Jacknis, 1988: 172). Her belief in the camera’s power to provide an objective, neutral representation of the ‘pro-filmic’ world is most clearly on display in a kind of fantasy scenario for visual anthropology that she offered in an article written in the mid-1970s. Responding to claims that no use of the moving image is entirely free from subjectivity and perspective, Mead suggested a kind of ideal practice for producing an ethnographic film:

Finally, the oft-repeated argument that all recording and filming is selective, that none of it is objective, has to be dealt with summarily. If tape recorder, camera, or video is set up and left in the same place, large batches of material can be collected without the intervention of the filmmaker or ethnographer and without the continuous self-consciousness of those who are being observed. The camera or tape recorder that stays in one spot, that is not tuned, wound, refocused, or visibly loaded, does become part of the background scene, and what it records did happen. (Mead, 1975/2003: 9)

For Mead then, the ideal ethnographic film was one in which the camera functions in a manner analogous to the CCTV surveillance camera.<sup>27</sup> Or, as Eliot Weinberger puts it, a ‘panopticon with limitless film’ (Weinberger, 1992: 38). The panopticon—a design for a circular prison in which a guard in a central tower is able to observe each and every cell without himself being seen—symbolises what Nichols calls ‘an economy of knowledge predicated on distance and control centred around a single all-seeing vantage point’ (Nichols, 1991: 212). Of course, the moral and ethical problems of such an approach to visual anthropology are immediately clear. Furthermore, as Weinberger argues, the amount one can learn from such inert recordings is also deeply questionable,

Leaving aside the obvious moral and political questions of surveillance - white folks, as usual, playing God, albeit an immobile one with a single fixed stare - the value of such information could be nothing more than slight. The simplest human events unfold in a tangle of attendant activities, emotions, motivations, responses, and thoughts. One can imagine a !Kung anthropologist attempting to interpret the practices and effects of the American cash economy from footage obtained with the cameras in the local bank. (Weinberger, 1992: 38)

Mead remained one of the most vocal champions of this instrumental conception of ethnographic filmmaking throughout her life. Even as others retreated from this vision, she continued to advocate an approach to ethnographic film in which the ideal involves a camera in a static position filming for as long as possible, and without any variation in the framing or the angle of view (Henley, 2013b: 101).

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<sup>27</sup> In this understanding of the CCTV camera it is seen as a kind of objective eye, free of perspective. Though of course, even the CCTV camera is not value neutral. For instance, the kinds of institutions and locations that are most heavily covered by their watchful eye reveal a great deal about the emphasis that Western societies in particular place on ownership and property rights.

### 3.3. The Films

Of the seven films that were edited together from the footage produced during Mead and Bateson's fieldwork, six form a series entitled 'Character Formation in Different Cultures'.<sup>28</sup> Alongside *Trance and Dance in Bali*, the other five films in this series are: *A Balinese Family* (1951), *Karba's First Years* (1952), *First Days in the Life of a New Guinea Baby* (1952), *Childhood Rivalry* (1954), and *Bathing Babies in Three Cultures* (1954) (this fifth film also includes material from New Guinea, as well as footage shot in North America in the 1930s and 1940s). All are relatively short, none longer than about 20 minutes. And, with the exception of *Trance and Dance in Bali*, all of them deal with parent-child interactions. *A Balinese Family*, *Karba's First Years*, *Childhood Rivalry* and *Bathing Babies in Three Cultures* all use material produced using the detached observation style of the 'running field notes' method. By contrast, *First Days in the Life of a New Guinea Baby* and *Trance and Dance in Bali* both include material that was not shot in this manner. As a result the cinematography in these two films is, at times, much more engaged and intimate. As Henley has argued, the 'Character Formation' films can be placed along a spectrum:

At one end one can situate the parent-child interaction films based largely on material shot in association with the "running field notes" method. These films are heavily structured narratively by Mead's voice-over commentary, the visual material merely providing support for the arguments she is seeking to make verbally, in the manner of an illustrated lecture. Minimal attention has been paid to the visual aesthetic qualities of the images, since that is not their primary function: their presence in the films is due to the fact that they offer confirmatory evidence for Mead's propositions, not because they have any intrinsic aesthetic merit. (Henley, 2013b: 100)

Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum are *Trance and Dance in Bali* and *First Days*. For instance, the former contains several slow motion sequences which were shot by Mead and Bateson's friend, the artist and self-trained anthropologist Jane Belo. These are moments that, Rony argues, 'cannot be ethnographised away by Mead's dry, authoritative voice-over which relentlessly typecasts the Balinese as abstractions of a distant primitive past' (Rony, 2006: 14). This slow motion footage of dancers contorting their bodies, bending backwards and forwards and stabbing themselves with ceremonial daggers without drawing blood, refuses to conform to the scientific rationalisation of Mead's interpretative framework. They are images which, as Rony suggests, are

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<sup>28</sup> The seventh film to be produced from the Bali material, *Learning to Dance in Bali* (1978), is not part of the 'Character Formation' series and was completed nearly 25 years after the final film in the original series. In this chapter I concentrate solely on the first six.

‘rather haunting and unforgettable’ (Rony, 2006: 14).<sup>29</sup> Likewise, in *First Days in the Life of a New Guinea Baby* Bateson’s camera is less detached and disengaged than in the other parent-child films. At times the camera gets extremely close to the mother and her new born baby. As Henley suggests, this gives the film a degree of intimacy that is entirely missing from the other films (Henley, 2013b: 90).<sup>30</sup> Mead’s voice-over commentary in this film is also, although still relentlessly objectifying, less overbearing than in the others. At times it drops out altogether. In these moments the viewer is able to simply silently observe—without Mead’s diagnostic/analytical pronouncements—what Henley calls ‘the assured competence’ with which the mother handles her child (Henley, 2013b: 91).



**Fig. 5.** The dance in slow motion.

Source: Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1952)

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<sup>29</sup> Ultimately though, Rony contends that even Belo’s more artful, subjective vision remained essentially consonant with Mead’s controlling, objectifying gaze. For instance, Rony notes that Belo was determined to use film to judge who was ‘truthfully in trance’, as opposed to those who were merely ‘performing trance’ (Rony, 2006: 16).

<sup>30</sup> Henley suggests that this more engaged cinematography may partly have been a result of the fact that Bateson had a closer relationship with the film’s subjects, having worked in New Guinea for several years by that point (Henley, 2013b: 90). Furthermore, the film was made in an impromptu manner (rather than the planned, structured style of the running field notes approach). As the opening titles note, Mead and Bateson heard that a woman had just given birth in a wooded area near the village where the pair were staying, and arrived at the spot only a few minutes after the baby was born—which might also explain the differences in shooting style.

All of the films were edited together in order to advance a theoretical interpretation of the visual material Mead and Bateson had recorded (Jacknis, 1988: 170). Apart from *First Days* and *Trance and Dance*—in which the form and structure of the film is dictated largely by the need to follow the ‘intrinsic chronology’ of a series of events (Henley, 2013b: 87)—all of the footage in the films is explicitly used as evidence to support the theories that Mead articulates in the films’ textual/verbal devices. The overarching structure of these films is therefore primarily dictated by Mead’s anthropological observations. For instance, *Bathing Babies in Three Cultures*, as its matter of fact title suggests, is a comparative study that presents material depicting mothers bathing their children in three different cultural contexts: New Guinea, the United States in the 1930s and 40s, and Bali. The film consists of four sections, each divided by a title card stating the country, and in the case of the two sections from the United States, the decade in which the footage was shot.<sup>31</sup> In each section Mead’s voice-over describes and highlights certain gestures, postures and actions. *A Balinese Family* and *Karba’s First Years* meanwhile are longitudinal rather than comparative, concentrating on interactions between parents and children filmed over a period of years. The footage highlights various stages in the children’s development, from breastfeeding and learning to walk, to being taught to dance and play a musical instrument. At various points in the footage we see Mead intervening in the scene being recorded by throwing a ball or asking the mother to interact with the child in a particular way. All of which gives the impression, as Henley suggests, that we are watching ‘some kind of open-air behaviour psychology experiment’ (Henley, 2013b: 88).

As is to be expected given the methodology which produced the footage for these films, the visual material is utilitarian. The film’s subjects are typically framed in either a medium or a long shot and the camera remains largely static, except for a few moments when one of the film’s subjects moves out of the frame and Bateson tracks this movement with his lens. Throughout each film, Mead’s sober voice-over commentary focuses on the way the mothers interact with the children physically. Her observations draw attention to gestures and movements that she sees as typical and that, she believed, were the root of certain defining characteristics within each culture. For instance, in the first section of *Bathing Babies* we see a New Guinea mother bathing her children in a river. She is framed in long shot, and the handheld and slightly out of focus image has the objectifying feel of

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<sup>31</sup> It is significant that the Bali and New Guinea material does not include a date, nor does Mead provide one in her voice-over commentary. These cultures are presented as somehow ‘out of time’.

wildlife photography shot with a telephoto lens. ‘Notice the way in which she holds the child by one stiff arm and how the child leans away from this stiff hold’ Mead says as the mother proceeds to wash one of her children. Such observations, no matter how detached or ostensibly ‘objective’ the visual material on which they were based, are of course deeply coloured by Mead’s underlying assumptions about the culture in question, as well as her own ideas about best practices in child-rearing.



**Fig. 6.** A detached and objectifying shooting style.

Source: Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s *Bathing Babies in Three Cultures* (1954)

Throughout the films, Mead places the physical interactions and bodily movements we see within what Nichols calls a ‘frame of conceptual understanding’ (Nichols, 1991: 217). At the end of *Bathing Babies* for instance, Mead makes explicit what has thus far been implicit in her descriptive, though ideologically inflected, commentary. She declares confidently that ‘In this simple act of bathing a child we see how strong the cultural contrasts are between the playful, teasing but inattentive Balinese mother, the careful conscientious American mother and the casual, brisk, matter-of-fact New Guinea mother’. The implication of all of the parent-child interaction films is that the ‘proper’ or ‘appropriate’ response to the images we see is to ‘grasp the conceptual or functional’ properties of the bodily movement on display (Nichols, 1991: 217). The ‘texture and

tonalities' of these physical actions, are represented within a conceptual/cognitive frame (Nichols, 1991: 217). Within a paradigm in which film footage is treated as data, visual material functions as a source of information which is yet to be codified, analysed, linguified. It is only through the imposition of an interpretative framework that these images can be 'understood'. Mead's disembodied voice of authority and the detached, objectifying, 'whole bodies' approach of this kind of filmmaking largely frustrates the possibility of an engagement with the material in a more intuitive, non-verbal, embodied manner. The knowledge provided by these films is therefore of an abstract, disembodied kind. It is based on 'generalisations and the typical' (Nichols, 2010: 199-200). The people we see are not framed as individual human beings in all their specificity and subjectivity. Instead their bodies, the movements they make, the way they interact with their children, are placed within an abstract, diagnostic framework, they are positioned as illustrations of a generalised cultural type.

As I noted above, there are moments in some of the Mead-Bateson films when the visual material threatens to overwhelm this empirical/rational scientific framework—as in the slow-motion sequences in *Trance and Dance in Bali*. That film is the most widely seen of the 'Character Formation' series and, ironically, the one that diverges most thoroughly from Mead's ideal approach to ethnographic filmmaking. Of course, in its emphasis on discursive explanations and on a visual and aural strategy that emphasises wholeness and coherence, it still embodies a positivist and instrumentalist approach to ethnographic filmmaking. But at the same time, there are moments of aesthetic sophistication that point towards a different understanding of the purpose and function of the camera within ethnographic film. In this way, the film points to a tension or conflict that has existed at the heart of ethnographic film from the very beginning.

#### 4. ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM: SCIENCE, OR ART?

Not all ethnographic filmmakers have conceived of the camera as a scientific instrument in the way that Mead did. Some, like Robert Gardner, who was an important figure within the non-fiction filmmaking community around Harvard University and whose influence is felt strongly in the work of the Sensory Ethnography Lab, have seen film as a fundamentally creative, even artistic medium. As Grimshaw suggests, in stereotypical terms Mead's approach can be seen as the embodiment of a kind of 'simple-minded scientism', while Gardner's work evinces what Grimshaw calls an



‘extravagant artistry’ (Grimshaw, 2011: 248). The way each approached film was in reality of course more nuanced and multivalent than these characterisations suggest, but their work remains perhaps the clearest illustration of these two tendencies within visual anthropology. Gardner’s work will be explored in more detail in Chapter 4. In that chapter I discuss the relationship between Gardner’s artistic sensibility and his use of cinematic techniques that point to the possibility of film conveying a different kind of knowledge to that conveyed by work that adheres to a scientific paradigm.

Documentary film, as Ilisa Barbash & Lucien Castaing-Taylor remind us, has always sat uneasily between the twin poles of ‘art’ and ‘science’,

In its avowed attachment to reality; its observation of human experience, and especially in its more expository and didactic moments, [documentary] often seems a close cousin to science. But in its aesthetic experimentation, its self-consciousness about form, and its endeavour to transfigure what it apprehends, it also displays close affinities to art. (Barbash and Taylor, 2007: 1)

But ethnographic film lies especially uneasily between these twin poles. For Karl Heider, even the term ‘ethnographic film’ itself ‘seems to embody an inherent tension or conflict between two ways of seeing and understanding, two strategies for bringing order to (or imposing order on) experience: the scientific and the aesthetic’ (Heider, 1976/2006: ix). Likewise, Harald Prins notes that the ethnocinematic tradition is ‘ambilineal’, with a line stemming from both science and fiction that twists back and forth (Prins, 1997: 283). As Prins suggests, this has been the cause of much ennui within the field (Prins, 1997: 283). This unease and tension arises in part, Bill Nichols argues, because the ‘criteria of scientific investigation butt up against the narrative, poetic, expressive and subjective dimensions of documentary’ (Nichols, 1991: 201). Of course, science and art are not discrete or mutually exclusive endeavours. Evidently there are certain features which distinguish the one from the other, but at a basic level they share many of the same goals: namely, to help us better understand ourselves, each other, the world, and our place within it. Certainly these are functions that both anthropology and the cinema—fiction films and documentaries—share. To create a rigid dichotomy that places art and science in opposition to one another is therefore both reductive, and unsupported by the way in which these two spheres of human activity actually coexist. They are

entwined with one another, mutually imbricated in a way that the history of moving images illustrates particularly clearly.<sup>32</sup>

In spite of the way science and art coexist in practical terms though, visual anthropologists have often conceived of the two as mutually exclusive. Nichols calls this a ‘self-constructed art-science divide’ (Nichols, 1994a: 74). It is a view that was common amongst anthropologists until at least the 1980s. As Jay Ruby notes, Karl Heider’s (1976/2006) aforementioned analysis of ethnographic film is based on what Ruby calls an ‘assumed and unquestioned dichotomy between the “science” of anthropology and the “art” of film’ (Ruby, 2000: 45). Although Heider ostensibly cautions against perpetuating the reductive opposition of ‘scientific ethnography’ versus ‘artistic cinema’ (Heider, 1976/2006: x) and professes to advocate an ethnographic filmmaking that is a productive interpenetration of the two, he nonetheless aligns himself firmly with one side of the art/science dichotomy. He calls for filmmakers to ‘think ethnographically, or scientifically’ and for ethnographers to ‘think cinematographically, or visually’ but ultimately maintains that ‘when we are talking about “ethnographic film,” ethnography must take precedence over cinematography. If ethnographic demands conflict with cinematographic demands, ethnography must prevail’ (Heider, 1976/2006: ix-3). What exactly ethnography ‘prevailing’ means in practice is outlined by Heider in a series of prescriptions for how best to produce an ethnographic film. I will discuss these in more detail in **section 4.1**.

Throughout the history of ethnographic film various commentators have expressed the belief that the ‘scientific’ and the ‘aesthetic’ are two ways of seeing the world that are fundamentally incompatible, and they have dismissed and even censured those efforts not deemed properly ‘scientific’.<sup>33</sup> As MacDougall notes, while ‘promoting anthropology as a science, some anthropologists have reacted with suspicion to approaches that challenge concepts of scientific method or scientific language, often branding these as “fiction” or “art”’ (MacDougall, 1998: 74). Eliot Weinberger (1992) satirised this situation with an amusing portrait of ethnographic filmmakers. He describes them as an exclusive ‘tribe’ who,

<sup>32</sup> Muybridge and Marey’s early motion studies for instance, discussed in section 2.2, demonstrate that ‘art’ and ‘science’ have always overlapped. Marey’s ‘chronophotography’ in particular, which shows successive stages of movement within a single image, has an extraordinary, otherworldly beauty that surpasses their ostensible function as empirical documents of particular physiological phenomena.

<sup>33</sup> Gardner’s *Forest of Bliss* (1986) was subject to precisely this kind of ‘disciplining’. The controversy that surrounded the release of this film will be explored in more detail in Chapter 4.

worship a terrifying deity known as Reality, whose eternal enemy is its evil twin, Art. They believe that to remain vigilant against this evil, one must devote oneself to a set of practices known as Science. Their cosmology however, is unstable: for decades they have fought bitterly among themselves as to the nature of their god and how best to serve him. They accuse each other of being secret followers of Art; the worst insult in their language is “aesthete”. (Weinberger, 1992: 24)

The image Weinberger paints is of course exaggerated for rhetorical and comic effect, but as a broad characterisation of historical attitudes towards ‘art’ within visual anthropology it contains some truth. For instance, in an infamous conversation between Mead and Bateson that took place towards the end of their careers (Brand, 1976), Mead laments the fact that in her words, ‘There are a bunch of filmmakers now that are saying, “It should be art,” and wrecking everything that we’re trying to do’. ‘Why the hell should it be art?’ she asks. Once again in this conversation Mead reiterates her belief that ‘if you’re going to be scientific about behaviour’ you need ‘to give other people access to the material, as comparable as possible to the access you had’ by placing the camera on a static tripod and recording ‘what happened’ (Brand, 1976). Today these kinds of arguments are shuttled aside in favour of more nuanced understandings of the nature of cinema and scientific inquiry. But historically this attitude has exerted a considerable amount of influence over ethnographic film and over the kinds of techniques that are deemed appropriate. As Mead and Bateson’s Bali project clearly demonstrates, the ways in which filmmakers working within and at the margins of ethnographic film have negotiated the territory represented by these two, ostensibly distinct, ways of seeing and organising the world has shaped the kinds of films that they have made. Whether one conceives of film as an art or a science changes the way one thinks of what the medium can, or even should, do.

#### 4.1. Policing the Boundaries of Ethnographic Film

Partly in an attempt to wrestle the term back from what they saw as a dilution of meaning as a result of too broad a range of films being labelled as such, some anthropologists have attempted to police the boundaries of ethnographic film. These individuals offered their own prescriptions for how best to conceive of, and indeed produce, a ‘proper’ ethnographic film. Karl Heider’s *Ethnographic Film* (Heider, 1976/2006/2006) is exemplary in this regard. Part history of the form and part practical filmmaking handbook, when the first edition was published in the mid-1970s it was the closest thing the field had to a ‘how-to’ guide. It was also an attempt to set ‘standards’ for the discipline. It

was, as Weinberger notes, an attempt to create a ‘rational, explicit methodology’ for ethnographic filmmaking, and a consensus regarding acceptable conventions and techniques (Weinberger, 1992: 38). Heider’s rules outline how best to use film to represent reality in an ‘ethnographic manner’. His prescriptions are notable in the first instance for their emphasis on filming and editing in such a way so as to maintain the spatial and temporal integrity of the original ‘pro-filmic’ event. He stresses the need to reduce the amount of ‘time distortion’ and ‘continuity distortion’ within the finished film. In other words, events should be shown in the order in which they occurred in reality, and ideally the filmic representation should last as long as the real event. He also advocates using natural, synchronous sound and cautions against the use of music on the soundtrack. Discussing the ‘appropriateness’ of music in ethnographic film, he writes that ‘the main criterion for ethnographic films should not be the quantity of information and impressions and sensory enjoyment that they can convey but rather the *successful conveyance of information*’ (Heider, 1976/2006: 53, emphasis added).

In a manner that has significant parallels with Mead and Bateson’s running field notes methodology (and the desire to record the totality of an occurrence that their approach embodies) for Heider the ‘successful conveyance of information’ meant a commitment to what could be described as an ‘aesthetics of wholeness’. As I noted in **section 1.1.**, Heider writes of the need to show ‘whole bodies’ and ‘whole acts’. In cinematic terms this translates as an emphasis on long shots and long takes in which all of a person’s body is visible. In addition, events or ‘acts’ that have a kind of intrinsic beginning, middle and end should, according to Heider, be shown in their entirety. Heider’s text also contains various other recommendations, including advice on how best to contextualise the events shown on screen with additional printed (i.e. textual) materials—especially with a view to adequately explaining any ‘distortions’. By this Heider means those moments when these cardinal rules have been ‘transgressed’. For instance, if a sequence contains images in an order that diverges from the order in which they were shot. These are fairly restrictive formal prescriptions, and one can well imagine the kinds of films that result from a strict adherence to them. To paraphrase Eliot Weinberger, following these rules slavishly is unlikely to produce the next *Citizen Kane* (1941) (Weinberger, 1992: 40).

In many ways though, the tension between conceptions of ethnographic film as art or as science has been invigorating as well as stifling. The perennial conflict between these twin poles has stimulated, and continues to stimulate, lively debate within ethnographic film. This debate has prompted different ways of thinking about and making films. Visual anthropology's scientific legacy provides a foil for contrasting approaches to filmmaking. For instance, as I demonstrate in my analyses of the two films in Chapter 5, the approaches to filmmaking found in *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* can be understood, at least partly, as two possible responses to visual anthropology's scientific legacy. I suggest that *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* implicitly reject the positivist tenets of the scientific tradition. For Lucien Castaing-Taylor the kind of thinking in which certain cinematic techniques are taboo based on the understanding that they are not properly 'ethnographic' is anathema. In *Sweetgrass*, as Anna Grimshaw has argued, 'the cinematic form itself [is] an integral part of the anthropological endeavour' (Grimshaw, 2011: 249). As my analysis of the film will demonstrate, this is also true of *Leviathan*. Ultimately I argue that the understanding of ethnographic film as—at least in part—an artistic or creative endeavour that is evident in *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* is accompanied by a concomitant shift in an understanding of film's capacities, and, most importantly, a shift in the relationship between cinematic techniques and the ways of knowing that these films engage with.

## CONCLUSION

As this chapter has demonstrated, for those anthropologists committed to the idea of the discipline as a science, the use of 'un-aesthetic' or utilitarian cinematic techniques was felt necessary in order to produce an ostensibly 'objective' record free from the 'distortions' that arise from a human observer's subjectivity and individual bias. My aim has been to demonstrate that in utilising such 'plain' cinematic techniques, the films themselves typically convey what I think of here, following Bill Nichols (1994b), as a kind of 'disembodied knowledge'. The scientific tradition within ethnographic film outlined in this chapter represents an important point on a continuum of developing and shifting conceptions of the relationship between cinematic techniques and knowledge within documentary and ethnographic film. In this chapter I have also shown how questions relating to the nature of ethnographic film, whether it is an 'art' or a 'science', have been at the heart of a heated debate surrounding the form. In later chapters I will demonstrate how filmmakers responding to this debate, and often pushing against and challenging the disciplinary consensus, have produced works that, in their different emphasis on the relationship between form

and knowledge, are important precursors to *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*. The epistemological assumptions underlying this later work are very different from the assumptions underlying the work explored in this chapter, and the ways of knowing embodied in their formal strategies are also different. Of course it is important to note that such developments should not be thought of as the result of a teleological progression—the inevitable end point of which is the kind of filmmaking on display in *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*. In the following chapter, I explore another important point on the continuum of shifting conceptions of the relationship between cinematic techniques and knowledge that this thesis traces: the work of John Grierson and the British documentary movement in the 1930s. Like Mead, Grierson also conceived of film as purposive and functional. For him film was a powerful means of mass education. It was a means of allowing people to know more about the world in which they lived. Though as we will see, even amongst the British documentary movement, art and poetry frequently found their way into a current of filmmaking that was otherwise often aesthetically restrained and didactic.

## CHAPTER TWO

### POETRY AND PROSE:

### THE BRITISH DOCUMENTARY MOVEMENT (1929-1937)

The notion of a coherent whole is implicit in all our thinking.

- John Grierson, 'The Character of an Ultimate Synthesis' (1922: 75).

I was on to it by 1924, that film could be turned into an instrument of the working class.

- John Grierson (Sussex, 1975: 2).

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A group of filmmakers active in Britain in the interwar period had an instrumentalist view of film that shares certain similarities with Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's. They also saw cinema as a kind of tool. But rather than viewing the camera as an objective recording device for capturing 'data', they saw it as a powerful instrument for education and social change. This group, led by a charismatic Scot by the name of John Grierson, came to be known as the British documentary movement. In this chapter I explore some of the influences, motivations and assumptions underlying their approach to documentary, and I examine the relationship between Griersonian documentary film and knowledge. Many of the films associated with the movement embody an understanding of the function and purpose of documentary as the communication of information, or 'propositional' knowledge. Critical commentary on the British documentary movement has often understood it in these terms and their work has often been criticised for putting this informational, educational intent above film aesthetics. I argue here that while it is true that many Griersonian documentaries are didactic and aesthetically restrained, and often utilise cinematic techniques that privilege the communication of propositional knowledge, the poetic and phenomenal qualities of some Griersonian documentaries also anticipate and prefigure developments in documentary form that evince rather different, and perhaps more radical,

conceptions of knowledge. These aspects of Griersonian documentary, though less commonly discussed, represent an important undercurrent within non-fiction cinema, the influence of which can be felt in some of the works discussed in Part 2 of this thesis.

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## 1. JOHN GRIERSON AND THE BRITISH DOCUMENTARY MOVEMENT

John Grierson (1898-1972) played a major role in the formation and development of the documentary project in Britain in the interwar period. Grierson's centrality to this moment in the history of non-fiction filmmaking has meant that he is sometimes referred to as the 'father' of the documentary.<sup>34</sup> He is also often credited with coining the term itself.<sup>35</sup> Grierson was not primarily a filmmaker though, and only personally directed a small number of films. As John Corner notes, his most significant contribution to the British documentary movement was as an 'organiser, campaigner and manifesto writer' (Corner, 1996: 11). Grierson was, by all accounts, a charismatic and persuasive individual. He was a proselytiser with a considerable aptitude for promoting his ideas, ideals and agenda, and his beliefs and assumptions fundamentally shaped the character, form and function of British documentary film. Grierson believed that cinema should be put to a purpose, that a documentary film should have 'ends' (Grierson, 1932/1998c: 87). For Grierson that purpose was to improve society through education, and to promote awareness of contemporary social and political issues. Throughout his career he vigorously championed this vision of documentary filmmaking as a tool for education and social improvement. He was unequivocal in his desire to use the medium in such an instrumentalist fashion, and once said, 'I look on the cinema as a pulpit, and use it as a propagandist' (Grierson quoted in Hardy, 1966: 16).

This vision of the purpose of documentary film is reflected in the cinematic techniques featured in many of the films that Grierson and his acolytes produced. A great many Griersonian documentaries are didactic and expository in character.<sup>36</sup> There is a significant emphasis on

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<sup>34</sup> See for instance: (Barsam, 1992: 46)

<sup>35</sup> In a review of Robert Flaherty's *Moana* (1926), Grierson described the film as having 'documentary value' (McLane, 2012: 4). Histories of the form often highlight this moment as the point at which the documentary film was definitively named. See for instance: (Aufderheide, 2007: 3).

<sup>36</sup> This emphasis on education was also reflected in the distribution structure for British documentary films in the interwar period. Apart from a few outliers like *Drifters* (1929) and *Night Mail* (1936), the majority of the films produced during this period were exhibited through a program of non-theatrical distribution that concentrated largely on schools (Swann, 1989: 28).



explanatory voice-overs, intertitles and rhetorical structures that emphasise argumentation and the communication of information, or a particular point of view, to the audience. It is for this reason that Grimshaw describes the Griersonian project as one that is primarily concerned with ‘*illumination* rather than *revelation*’ (Grimshaw, 2001: 58, emphasis in original). She argues that the documentary movement’s work evinces an ‘enlightenment way of seeing’ (Grimshaw, 2001: 57). In this enlightenment vision the cinema is conceived of as a vehicle for communicating a particular kind of knowledge. Grierson’s audiences, Grimshaw suggests, were expected to emerge from the cinema not knowing *differently*, but knowing *more* (Grimshaw, 2001: 62). Similarly, David MacDougall has noted that the Griersonian documentary is ‘concerned with essences, and the camera was only one of several tools for conveying what one already knew about life’ (MacDougall, 1982: 9).

This is a kind of vision, Grimshaw suggests, that has much in common with the scientific ethnography of the inter-war period. She notes that both projects exhibit ‘an emphasis upon order, integration, rationalism and knowledge’ (Grimshaw, 2001: 58). Furthermore, like scientific ethnography, Griersonian documentary is, Grimshaw suggests, ‘built upon the idea [that] the world is ultimately knowable [and] rendered transparent through the exercise of the light of reason’ (Grimshaw, 2001: 66). Grimshaw’s point of comparison is primarily the work of the British anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown—a figure central to the development and consolidation of an approach to the discipline known as ‘structural functionalism’.<sup>37</sup> But the parallels between a scientific conception of ethnographic film, as exemplified in Chapter 1 by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s approach in Bali and New Guinea in the 1930s, and Grierson’s vision of the documentary film are also striking.

### 1.1. You Don’t Get Truth by Turning On a Camera

Some of the assumptions, beliefs and practices underlying Grierson’s documentary project and the Mead-Bateson project were very similar. Grierson’s instrumentalist framing of the cinema as a kind of tool has echoes of the latter’s understanding of the camera as an instrument analogous to those

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<sup>37</sup> This approach saw society as a kind of complex system that could be explained through the identification and classification of its various parts. It is a framework that emphasises ‘rules, order and stability [...] conceptual clarification [and] the application of reason, rather than the assumption of intuitive understanding, in the identification of the mechanisms by which society’s different parts fitted together’ (Grimshaw, 2001: 66).

used in the natural sciences. His profound belief in cinema's potential for education and social change also parallels the belief in the camera's potential as a tool for anthropological inquiry that was exhibited by early ethnographic filmmakers. Furthermore, both projects were also motivated by a desire to engage with people previously considered marginal to contemporary society. Anthropologists like Mead and Bateson were engaged in the process of making visible 'peoples previously excluded from conceptions of humanity' (Grimshaw, 2001: 31). Likewise, Grierson located 'his new project of documentary cinema not with the established intellectuals but with "ordinary people"' (Grimshaw, 2001: 60). They each issued a provocative challenge to the prevailing social and political assumptions about, respectively, indigenous peoples and the working class. Both of these were groups who were often viewed as somehow inferior or less civilised.<sup>38</sup> Finally, both projects also stemmed from a belief in the need to engage directly with the people who were being represented. Like the anthropological fieldworkers of the 1930s, Grierson stressed the value of direct, first hand observation.<sup>39</sup>

Like Mead, Grierson was also occasionally hostile to notions of 'art'. For instance, in a famous article that outlines his theory of documentary, Grierson lambasts what he calls 'the self-conscious pursuit of beauty' as 'a reflection of selfish wealth, selfish leisure and aesthetic decadence' (Grierson, 1932/1998c: 87-88). As Mark Cousins and Kevin Macdonald note, Grierson's conception of cinema meant that for him,

the only worthwhile type of cinema was factual and useful—of educational or material benefit to society. If a film served its utilitarian function well, he believed, it would also be of artistic merit. If it was entertaining, so much the better - but that was of secondary concern. He wanted his films to do good. (Cousins and Macdonald, 2006: 94)

But their projects were also different in a number of important respects. The filmmakers associated with the British documentary movement were interested in documenting social reality, but they did not treat their cameras as objective recording devices. Although Grierson would sometimes stress the 'anti-aesthetic' character of documentary film, as I noted in my Introduction, his conception of

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<sup>38</sup> Whatever the ostensibly progressive intentions of their practitioners though, from a contemporary perspective both projects may be seen as deeply problematic for the way in which they were imbricated with forms of social and political control both at home and abroad (Grimshaw, 2001: 58).

<sup>39</sup> Explaining why he felt qualified to produce *Drifters* (1929), his film about the herring fishing industry, Grierson wrote: 'I did what I could to get inside the subject. I had spent a year or two of my life wandering about on the deep sea fishing boats and that was an initial advantage' (Grierson, 1929/1998b: 78).

the form was built upon the idea that documentary involves the ‘creative treatment’ of reality. As John Corner notes,

What is absolutely clear is that, in the advocating of his ideas about documentary method and the documentary “mission”, Grierson is not in the grip of a naive realism [...] the kind of practice he is putting forward is grounded in a considerable degree of discursive skill and creative “vision” (revelatory, “deep-seeing”), it is not simply a result of any “capturing” performed by the camera. It is therefore thoroughly and self-consciously aestheticised, a symbolically expressive activity. (Corner, 1996: 13)

The filmmakers of the British documentary movement therefore saw no contradiction in utilising techniques that had more in common with the fiction film than the observational and strictly non-interventionist approach of scientific ethnographic film. Grierson and his cohort wanted to create filmic representations of reality that conveyed what they believed were important underlying ‘truths’ about that reality, and they believed that a certain amount of artifice and manipulation was necessary to achieve this goal. ‘You don’t get truth by turning on a camera’, Grierson wrote,

you have to work with it [...] you don’t get it by simply peep hole camera work [...] There is no such thing as truth until you have made it into a form. Truth is an interpretation, a perception. (Grierson quoted in Aitken, 1992: 7)

My aim in this chapter is to demonstrate that alongside the conservative, didactic, aesthetically restrained vision Grimshaw and others have identified as a central feature of the British documentary movement, there are other significant currents that run through the films made by Grierson and his acolytes. There are poetic, aesthetic elements within British documentary that exist alongside the ‘plainer’ elements. This current within the documentary movement influenced the work of both David MacDougall and Robert Gardner, filmmakers who I discuss in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. Before I move on to consider individual works and discuss the relationship between the formal techniques they utilise and the kind of knowledge they convey, I want to first provide a brief overview of the history of the documentary movement. In this section I will also explore the key ideas that underpinned Grierson’s approach to the documentary film.

## 2. THE BRITISH DOCUMENTARY MOVEMENT: BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Beginning in the late 1920s, Grierson drew together a group of initially inexperienced but enthusiastic young men and women whom he trained in what Paul Swann calls ‘the art of purposive filmmaking’ (Swann, 1989: 16).<sup>40</sup> Grierson was able to convince the government to fund his project, and beginning in 1928 he set up a film unit based at the Empire Marketing Board (EMB). This unit then moved to the General Post Office (GPO) in 1933, where it stayed until the start of the second world war. Grierson conceived of the documentary movement, in part, as an oppositional project. Specifically, it was an attempt to forge a new and uniquely national form of cinema in resistance to the overwhelming dominance of American cultural product on British cinema screens. In attempting to build a national film culture and a national film industry, Grierson rejected both the form and content of the Hollywood fiction film. The impulse stemmed from a desire to counteract Hollywood’s commercial dominance. It was a deliberate effort to remedy the imbalance of cultural trade between Great Britain and the United States (Swann, 1989: 176). But Grierson’s vision of cinema was also conceived in opposition to Hollywood along another important line. In Grierson’s eyes Hollywood cinema existed purely for financial gain, and not moral or spiritual uplift. By contrast, Grierson wanted the cinema to concern itself with the edification of society. Crucially, he also wanted it to achieve this purpose not through the dominant fiction film tradition—with its use of imaginative narratives, actors and studio sets—but through a commitment to ‘actuality’ (Grierson 1932/1998c: 81-93).

The core members of the documentary film movement were a small number of middle- and upper-class people who ‘fell under the spell’ of Grierson’s personality and ideological perspective (Swann, 1989: 16). Amongst the most prominent members of this group were Basil Wright, Arthur Elton,

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<sup>40</sup> In addition to the far more frequently discussed male members of the British documentary movement, there were also a number of women who made a significant contribution to documentary film in Britain during the 1930s and 1940s. Often starting off in technical roles, women such as Evelyn Spice, Budge Cooper and Kay Mander went on to become non-fiction directors and producers. This was a shift in responsibility precipitated in part by personnel shortages during the Second World War. During the war these women made films covering a range of subjects, including women’s issues and domestic topics; but also gardening, industrial tool use, medicine, farming, firefighting, and civil defence procedures. John Grierson’s younger sisters Ruby and Marion were also both involved in the documentary movement. Ruby apparently played a critical, but uncredited, role in the production of *Housing Problems* (1935) by helping to put the interviewees at ease, and assuaging their inhibitions in front of the ‘gentlemen’ of the film unit (Winston, 2008: 51). Her first effort as director was *London Wakes Up* (1936), a film about life in London that exhibits a warmth and humour that would be a feature of many of her subsequent works. Ruby went on to direct a number of films both prior to and during the war, before she was tragically killed in 1940 when the ocean liner she was travelling on was torpedoed (Easen, 2014).

Edgar Anstey, and Stuart Legg. Related to this central group were a number of other filmmakers who were committed to Grierson while under his authority but went on to shift away from his ideology and approach to filmmaking when they left his orbit in the late 1930s. This latter group included Alberto Cavalcanti, Harry Watt and Humphrey Jennings.<sup>41</sup> Broadly speaking, the first group shared Grierson's view of documentary as a tool for social improvement, while the latter became more interested in its potential as an art-form and as entertainment (Sussex, 1975: xii). This factional nature partly helps to explain the wide-ranging styles and approaches that can be found in the large number of films made by the individuals at one point or another associated with the movement.

In this chapter I concentrate on four films made while Grierson's influence over the group remained strong. This was roughly during the years between 1929 and 1937. The films I focus on here are *Drifters* (1929); *Granton Trawler* (1934); *Housing Problems* (1935); and *Song of Ceylon* (1934).<sup>42</sup> *Drifters* and *Housing Problems*, though very different in form and content, are both exemplary of what Grimshaw (2001) identifies as the holistic, top-down, enlightenment vision of Griersonian documentary film. Their vision of the world remains an ordered and coherent one, and their function is essentially straightforwardly communicative. They are explanatory and illustrative—intent on communicating information and making an argument about a particular subject. By contrast, while *Song of Ceylon* and *Granton Trawler* remain tied on the one hand to an explanatory, illustrative approach (and an ordered, holistic vision of the world), they also hint at the possibility of a more fragmented, less immediately legible, less discursive form of cinematic communication, one in which the phenomenal, the poetic, the aesthetic and the abstract are privileged.

## 2.1. Function Over Form

Grierson's ideas have had a remarkable longevity, and his influence has extended well beyond the British documentary movement itself. His notion of documentary as socially purposive and

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<sup>41</sup> Another important member, Paul Rotha, was committed to the Griersonian approach to filmmaking but bristled somewhat at the level of obedience and discipline that Grierson required of his acolytes and thus always remained at one remove from the core group (Swann, 1989: 16).

<sup>42</sup> Grierson is credited as a producer on all of these except *Housing Problems*, but his influence can still be felt on this title in terms of its approach, its scope and its intended purpose.

educational has had a major impact on the development, and public perception, of the form. As Zoë Druick and Deane Williams note, for many filmmakers and critics ‘the explanatory and even utopian aspects of film culture that Grierson introduced continue to be an evocative touchstone’ (Druick and Williams, 2014: 2).<sup>43</sup> It has been argued that Grierson’s influence has been both inspiring and limiting. For instance, Mark Cousins and Kevin Macdonald articulate a common critique of the documentary movement when they write that Grierson’s ideas about the documentary as a tool for social betterment have been ‘so pervasive [...] that there has been a tendency ever since to underestimate the diverse imaginative possibilities of the form’ (Cousins and Macdonald, 2006: 95). Likewise, many critics have argued that Griersonian documentary too often subordinated aesthetic concerns to instrumental, educational and socially purposive ones. For instance, Andrew Tudor argued that Grierson’s ‘purposive cinema emphasises [...] purposiveness at the expense of the cinema’ (Tudor, 1974: 75). As Corner (1996) reminds us though, it is easy to fall into the trap of oversimplifying and stereotyping the documentary movement. There is in fact a remarkable diversity of form and approach to be found, from what Corner calls the ‘maximum transparency’ of a film like *Housing Problems*, to the ‘aesthetic density’ of *Coal Face* (1935) (Corner, 1996: 63).

Ian Aitken (1992) suggests that the interpretation of Griersonian documentary as a style of filmmaking in which aesthetics were subordinated to social and political instrumentalism rests in part on an overemphasis on the ‘maximum transparency’ strand of British documentary film. It is an interpretation, he argues, derived from a tendency to concentrate attention on the ‘social reportage films’ such as *Housing Problems*, *The Nutrition Film: Enough to Eat* (1936), *Kensal House* (1936), *The Smoke Menace* (1937), and *Children at School* (1937) (Aitken, 1992: 10-11). He also contends that this interpretation of the documentary movement stems from an inadequate investigation of the intellectual ideas underpinning their work, and suggests that a careful reading of Grierson’s writings reveals a theory of documentary film that does not subordinate aesthetics to

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<sup>43</sup> One area of non-fiction work that has been heavily influenced by the Griersonian approach is TV documentary, particularly of the investigative reportage or historical kind. The documentary movement’s influence is also apparent in many of the recent theatrically released documentaries whose intent is to educate audiences about a particular social, political or environmental issue of pressing concern—in part with the hope of galvanising collective action. Films of this type that have had considerable commercial and critical success in recent years include *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *Inequality for All* (2013) and *Blackfish* (2013). Lastly, the kinds of models of funding and distribution that the British documentary movement pursued and institutionalised—though complemented today by newer digital models such as those exemplified by online crowd funding platforms like Kickstarter, and video streaming services like YouTube, Netflix and Vimeo—remain important to contemporary documentary production.

social and political instrumentality, but in fact suggests that the two should have equal status (Aitken, 1992: 11). Here he cites a passage from a piece of writing in which Grierson defines documentary in almost entirely aesthetic terms:

Most people, when they think of documentary film, think of public reports and social problems and worthwhile education and all that sort of thing. For me it is something more magical. It is a visual art which can convey a sense of beauty about the ordinary world, the world on your doorstep. (Grierson quoted in Aitken, 1992: 11)

In a notable parallel with the tension that exists at the heart of ethnographic film between its artistic and scientific impulses then, there is a similar contradiction or tension at work within the films of the documentary movement. Grierson's ideas rest on what Corner calls a combination of two 'precariously positioned sets of ideas - one concerning the social purposes of the form and one concerning its nature as filmic practice' (Corner, 1996: 15). Griersonian documentary, he notes, is both 'strongly informationalist' as well as an 'exercise in creativity, an art-form drawing on interpretative imagination both in perceiving and using the sounds and images of "the living scene" to communicate "the real"' (Corner, 1996: 15). This tension is often apparent even within individual films. As Barbash and Castaing-Taylor note, at times 'the distinction between impressionistic and expository films is fuzzy [and] a number of early films in Griersonian tradition may be as properly described as one as the other' (Barbash and Taylor, 1997: 20). *Drifters*, discussed in more detail in **section 3.1.**, falls into this camp. This contradictory character is also apparent in the way the movement framed and discussed their work. It is, for instance, a key feature of Grierson's writings. In some of these he stresses categorically that it is the informational and educational intent of the documentary that must take precedence, while in others he emphasises the importance of its aesthetic character (as in the extract above).<sup>44</sup> I will explore this aspect of Grierson's writing in more detail when I discuss his theory of documentary film in **section 2.2.**

Grierson's ideas about the documentary were informed by a particular set of experiences and intellectual influences. I now want to briefly explore some of these as they help to illustrate and

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<sup>44</sup> These contradictions can partly be explained by the fact that Grierson's writing was polemical and reactive, often 'stimulated by the heat of specific campaigns' (Swann, 1989: 18). At times it was expedient for Grierson to stress the aesthetic character of documentary, while at other times it was expedient for him to stress its ostensibly 'anti-aesthetic', informational and socially purposive character. Grierson's ideas about the documentary therefore constitute what Corner calls a 'highly partial and strategic perspective on non-fiction cinema, one which was suited to his own particular ambitions and context' (Corner, 1996: 2).

account for some of the key characteristics of the British documentary movement, including the apparent tension or contradiction between ‘aesthetics’ and ‘information’. I conduct this brief overview in the knowledge that there has been a considerable amount of scholarship and critical commentary dedicated to exploring the history and significance of British documentary, and the philosophical and intellectual underpinnings of Grierson’s ideas. For instance, the institutional history of the movement is meticulously documented in Paul Swann’s monograph, *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926-1946* (1989). Swann’s book is based on a thorough study of public policy reports and memoranda, as well as the various writings produced by members of the documentary movement. It is a detailed piece of archival research—a social and political history that explores the administrative, ideological, and intellectual relationships between the British state and the documentary film. Swann’s book greatly informed my understanding of the history of British documentary and his work underpins my commentary here. In addition, Ian Aitken’s *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement* (1992) also helped to shape my understanding of the foundational ideas that informed Grierson’s approach to the documentary. Aitken exhaustively explores the intellectual, societal and aesthetic influences that shaped Grierson’s thought. As I will demonstrate, his nuanced reading of Grierson’s embrace of idealist philosophy, and the distinction Grierson drew between ‘the real’ and ‘the actual’ is especially helpful for clarifying some of the apparent contradictions in Grierson’s theory of documentary film.

## 2.2. Intellectual Foundations

Grierson’s ideas about the purpose and function of documentary can be traced, in the first instance, to his upbringing. His schoolmaster father instilled in him liberal humanist ideals, and left the young Grierson with a lasting view that education was of paramount importance (Sussex, 1975; McLane, 2012). Meanwhile, Grierson’s mother was responsible for the more radical aspects of his political education. It is from her that Grierson learned first-hand of the Scottish Socialist movement that was active in the early decades of the 1900s, predominantly in the working class district along the Clyde river in Glasgow (Sussex, 1975: 1). This exposure to labour movements helped to form what Cousins and MacDonald describe as a political outlook that constituted a ‘non-dogmatic Marxist concern for the community in precedence to the individual’ (Cousins and Macdonald, 2006: 94). These initial experiences, formed in a distinctly Scottish intellectual and



religious tradition, were then complemented by Grierson's exposure to developments in theories of mass communication and public relations in the United States in the 1920s.

After studying English and Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University, Grierson left the UK for America in 1924 to pursue postgraduate research into public opinion and the mass media (Sussex, 1975). Whilst in the United States, Grierson encountered the work of Walter Lippmann, a writer whose work on public relations would provide one of the crucial inspirations for the young Scot's conception of documentary. In *Public Opinion* (1922) Lippmann argued that as society increases in size and complexity, the individual citizen becomes more and more estranged from the process of government. Lippmann suggested that this increasing complexity undermined the egalitarian principles that underlie conventional democratic theory. As Forsyth Hardy writes: 'Men like Walter Lippmann were saying at the time that the older expectations of democratic education were impossible since they appeared to require that the ordinary citizen should know every detail of public affairs as they developed from moment to moment' (Hardy, 1966: 14). Lippmann's ideas were reflective of broader conservative ideologies prevalent in America at the time that questioned the validity and efficacy of universal franchise and argued instead that society be governed principally by specialist elites (Aitken, 1998: 2). Grierson disagreed with this sceptical view of democracy. He remained convinced that an egalitarian democratic society remained possible if only adequate public information and education systems could be constructed. He believed that the best way to educate and engage the public was through mass media, which could be used to quickly and simply put across the basic facts and information needed for a citizen to make informed democratic decisions. His first thoughts were to look to the 'yellow' press, a form of popular, eye-catching and sensationalist journalism (Sussex, 1975: 2). It was Lippmann himself though, who suggested to Grierson that the cinema might provide the perfect vehicle for undertaking the kind of mass education he advocated (Swann, 1989: 7). As Aitken notes, 'from that point on the idea that public education, communicated through the medium of film, could help preserve the framework of democracy became the foundation of Grierson's theory of documentary film' (Aitken, 1998: 2-3).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Whilst he was in America Grierson also took the opportunity to preach at nearby churches. He apparently anticipated employing the mass media in a similar manner to his sermons, and approached the task with a missionary zeal (Swann, 1989: 3).

As Swann reminds us though, while Grierson may have disagreed with Lippmann's notion that the complexity of modern society necessitated that it be entirely ruled by an elite group of experts, he nonetheless adhered to a 'nineteenth century liberal' view that 'ruling elites had a commitment to inform and educate those over whom they held "stewardship"' (Swann, 1989: 5). Grierson, Swann argues, remained 'an elitist with populist inclinations throughout his life' (Swann, 1989: 5-6). He firmly believed that 'the expert' had a central role to play in mediating between the complications of the social and political world and the ordinary voter, and that the benevolent and 'civically minded' filmmaker could be one such expert (Druick and Williams, 2014: 2). As I will demonstrate, this belief in the importance of experts is strongly reflected in the films themselves. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the use of so called 'voice-of-god' style narration (a strategy I will explore in more detail when I discuss *Housing Problems* in **section 3.2.**).

The idea that motion pictures were an exciting, dynamic force capable of 'doing good' was common in the United States in the 1920s. Will Hays, Hollywood's film czar at the time and the namesake of the famous 'Hays Code', spoke of film as 'possibly the most potent instrument in the world for moral influence and education' (Hays quoted in Swann, 1989: 27). As Druick and Williams note, Grierson was similar to many reformers of his day in his belief that film could engage people by making learning 'more vital and exciting' (Druick and Williams, 2014: 2). Grierson will also have been aware of the potential of cinema for political and ideological purposes thanks to his study of Lenin, who of course is famously said to have remarked that, 'of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important' (Taylor, 2008b: 36). Grierson's innovation, Swann argues, was to adapt Lenin's 'revolutionary dictum to the purposes of social democracy' (Swann, 1989: 7). Cinema seemed to offer the perfect solution for Grierson with regards to his desire, shaped by these various foundational experiences, to educate the population and improve society. Significantly, the medium had an immediacy and a popular appeal that print media lacked, and it was particularly popular amongst the working class. But as I noted above, Grierson felt that the fictional entertainment film that dominated British screens was not fit for the purposes he had in mind. The distinction that Grierson drew between fictional films and documentaries was a key part of his theory of documentary film, and it is to this that I now want to turn.

### 2.3. Grierson's Theory of Documentary Film

Grierson's writings contain a number of contradictions and inconsistencies, but his broad ideas about the character and purpose of documentary were fairly clear from the beginning. Firstly, like the filmmakers discussed in the previous chapter, the foundation of his theory was a belief that the photographic image had a special relationship to the observable world. Grierson believed that film was capable of transcribing the 'phenomenological surface of reality' (Aitken, 2013: 336). For Grierson this gave the cinema certain advantages over other artistic media. In a lecture written between 1927 and 1933 he notes:

In the first place [the documentary] has *direct contact* with material which has been denied the other arts. It cannot only observe the living material of the world, it can also *reproduce it*. It can bring clearer before you the living lineaments of human endeavour, human achievement and human emotion, it can bring you those nuances of action and reaction which we see about us everyday [...] A world of material never before available to creative art, is open to the cinema. (Grierson, 1927-33/1998d: 77, emphasis added)

This direct contact with 'living material' was essential to Grierson's understanding of the specificity of the documentary film. However, as I noted in **section 1.1.**, Grierson was not advocating the kind of 'naïve realism' embodied by Margaret Mead's approach to ethnographic film. For Grierson the task of documentary film was not solely 'one of reproduction but of *interpretation*' (Grierson, 1927-33/1998d: 77, emphasis added). Grierson expands on this notion of 'interpretation' in his most frequently cited essay, 'First Principles of Documentary' (1932/1998c). Here he argues that what distinguishes the documentary 'proper' from what he called the 'lower categories' of factual cinema—such as the newsreel or scientific film—is creative, authorial intervention. Grierson argues that while these lower forms also draw on 'natural material', it is only through 'arrangements, rearrangements and creative shapings' of this material that one '[wanders] into the world of documentary proper' (Grierson, 1932/1998c: 83).

As Ian Aitken notes, while 'Grierson's theory of documentary film was primarily an aesthetic of symbolic expression, it nevertheless expressed a belief in the relative objectivity of documentary in relation to fiction cinema' (Aitken, 1992: 7). For Grierson this objectivity, a function of the documentary image's 'direct contact' with the 'living material of the world', gave the documentary

its superiority over fictional cinema (Corner, 1996: 14).<sup>46</sup> Perhaps paradoxically, Grierson remained committed to his belief in the relative objectivity of the documentary image even as he also stressed that creative intervention was a defining characteristic of the form. Aitken argues that this somewhat contradictory position can be at least partially reconciled through an understanding of the philosophical ideas upon which Grierson's theory of documentary film rests. He suggests that Grierson's understanding of documentary was predicated upon an important philosophical distinction between the 'real' and the 'actual' (Aitken, 1992). The 'actual' being the phenomenal world, whilst the 'real' [...] is something deeper than that. [More] profound' (Grierson, 1927-33/1998d: 76). For Aitken, this conceptualisation of the relationship between the 'empirical image of reality, and underlying more abstract realities' (Aitken, 2013: 336) lies at the heart of Grierson's ideas about the place of creative intervention within the documentary film.

It is also for this reason, Aitken suggests, that while advocating creative intervention on the one hand, Grierson also maintained that the documentary filmmaker must utilise a 'naturalist' representational style:

Grierson's [...] ideology consisted of a belief that the world, as it was perceived through the human sensory apparatus or through the camera lens, must constitute the basis of aesthetic representation, because it (the perceived world), was the empirical manifestation of underlying determining forces. Because of this, the film-maker, though at liberty to restructure actuality footage to some extent, must retain a commitment to naturalist representation. (Aitken, 1992: 7)

Here we can see in greater detail the ways in which Grierson's ideas both converge with, and diverge from, Mead's. They both believed that the photographic image had a direct link to observable reality that made it superior to other modes of representation, but unlike Mead, Grierson did not believe that it was possible to understand reality simply by recording the surface appearance of things. As I have already noted though, Grierson was sometimes inclined to downplay the importance of the creative or transformative factors within documentary in those moments when he was advocating the form's public informational intent. Indeed, Grierson sometimes performs what Corner calls 'a complete U-turn' and describes the documentary project as being 'essentially "anti-aesthetic" in

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<sup>46</sup> 'Documentary', Grierson claimed, 'can achieve an intimacy of knowledge and effect impossible to the shim-sham mechanics of the studio, and the lily fingered interpretations of the metropolitan actor' (Grierson, 1932/1998c: 83).

character' (Corner, 1996: 13-14). In these moments Grierson expresses a kind of puritanical disdain for 'art'.

## 2.4. "Art for Art's Sake" and the City Symphony Film

The problem, Grierson claimed, was not art *per se*, but rather 'art for art's sake' (Grierson, 1932/1998c: 88). This attitude stemmed in part from Grierson's grounding in an intellectual tradition in which art could only be conceived as purposive and functional, not as an 'end' in and of itself (Swann, 1989: 6). At times Grierson is withering about cultural activity invested in aesthetic concerns to the exclusion of what he describes as 'jobs of work, and other pedestrian beginnings' (Grierson, 1932/1998c: 88). Crucially though, Grierson describes 'art' as permissible if it is a 'by-product of a job of work done' (Grierson, 1932/1998c: 87). 'Beauty', he writes, 'will come in good time to inhabit the statement which is honest and lucid and deeply felt and which fulfils the best ends of citizenship' (Grierson, 1932/1998c: 87). Grierson's position then, at least in this piece of writing, is that art is only truly valuable if it is of educational or material benefit to society.

One style of film that comes under particular fire from Grierson in relation to this utilitarian understanding of art is the 'city symphony', a sub-genre of documentary film common in the 1920s and 1930s. City symphonies are films that Bill Nichols labels 'poetic' documentaries (Nichols, 2010). They emphasise form, rhythm and movement over any overt intellectual component or transfer of information. Famous examples include *Rien que les heures* (1926), *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), and *Rain* (1929). Typically these films show a 'day in the life' of an urban centre, as in the roughly twenty four hours in Paris that *Rien que les heures* covers. That film, directed by the Brazilian filmmaker Alberto Cavalcanti, consists of contrasting scenes of various activities in Paris edited together to form a single composite day.<sup>47</sup> Many of these films are considered classics of avant-garde cinema, whilst also being claimed by documentary history too.<sup>48</sup> For Grierson, city symphony films come up lacking because they have no purpose or 'ends'. 'The little daily doings, however finely symphonised, are not enough' he writes, 'One must pile up beyond doing or process

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<sup>47</sup> Cavalcanti would notably go on to join the documentary movement as a member of the General Post Office film unit in 1933. While there he encouraged many of the young directors to take a more formally experimental and 'poetic' approach. His influence can be felt in *Coal Face* (1935), *Night Mail* (1936), and *Spare Time* (1939) amongst others.

<sup>48</sup> Scott MacDonald (2015) notably draws attention to this body of work as an early example of what he calls the 'avant-doc'.

to creation itself, before one hits the higher reaches of art [...] the real job only begins as they apply ends to their observation and their movements (Grierson, 1932/1998c: 87). Grierson singles out *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* for criticism specifically:

There was one criticism which, out of appreciation for a fine film and a new and arresting form, the critics failed to make; and time has not justified the omission. For all its ado of workmen and factories and swirl and swing of a great city, *Berlin* created nothing. Or rather if it created something, it was that shower of rain in the afternoon. (Grierson, 1932/1998c: 87)

It is in assessments like this that Grierson's thoughts on the documentary appear to me to be the most restrictive, and perhaps even damaging to, as Cousins & McDonald put it, the 'imaginative possibilities of the form' (Cousins and Macdonald, 2006: 95). Grierson's prescriptive, moralistic assessment of the city symphony—and by extension other styles of documentary that emphasise formal, aesthetic properties over socially purposive ones—serves, like the prescriptions of a certain strand of ethnographic filmmakers explored in the previous chapter, to limit and restrict creative experimentation. Grierson's criticisms aside though, the city symphony captured the imaginations of a great many filmmakers, including a number of members of the documentary movement itself. Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* for instance, to be explored in more detail in **section 4.1.**, clearly takes the city symphony form as a model for its structure and tone.

The aim of this section was to briefly outline the history and development of the British documentary movement, and to highlight some of the assumptions and motivations that lay beneath their vision of the documentary as an instrument of education and social change. Its aim was also to begin to explore some of the contradictions and ambiguities that exist within Grierson's theory of documentary film. In the following sections, I explore how these assumptions, motivations and contradictions manifest in the films themselves.

### 3. THE ILLUSTRATIVE/EXPOSITORY TENDENCY

The two films discussed in this section are John Grierson's *Drifters* (1929) and Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton's *Housing Problems* (1935). Both are representative of what could be thought of as the documentary movement's illustrative/expository tendency. *Drifters* was the first film to emerge from the British documentary movement, and the first and only feature length work directed by

Grierson himself. The film clearly embodies Grierson's vision of documentary as a 'means of enabling people to know more about the world in which they lived' (Grimshaw, 2001: 62). At the same time, the film has a certain impressionistic quality—particularly in its use of a montage style that borrows heavily from the work of Russian filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein—that seems to prefigure later, more poetic or aesthetically inclined work. In this way the film encapsulates some of the key characteristics, and paradoxes, of the British documentary movement discussed so far. Ultimately though, its ordered, coherent vision of the world remains firmly anchored in the desire to illuminate and educate. *Housing Problems* is also representative of this vision, it is an example of the documentary movement at their most didactic and aesthetically restrained.

### 3.1. *Drifters*

Funded by the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) and conceived as a publicity exercise for the North Sea herring fishing industry, *Drifters* follows a group of fishermen over the course of one voyage on a steam driven fishing trawler.<sup>49</sup> Its simple narrative structure follows the organising logic of the fishing voyage itself, with its intrinsic beginning, middle, and end.<sup>50</sup> The film opens with a long shot of a peaceful looking village, as a group of men seen in silhouette trek across this bucolic idyll. Next, we cut to a shot of the port, dynamic looking and modern in contrast to the preceding scene—rows upon rows of fishing vessels await their crew. The trawler then leaves for the open sea, where the men cast their nets and wait overnight as the fish gather. The next day the crew weather a heavy storm as they strain to haul in their precious cargo, before rushing back to land, and the market, to sell their wares. Amidst the bustle of the market we see men bartering for the best deal, and women deftly gutting fish before they are iced, loaded into barrels and sent off in freight trains and large

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<sup>49</sup> The Empire Marketing Board was established in 1926 to promote the products of the British empire. With the help of Stephen Tallents, then secretary of the EMB, Grierson was able to convince the Department of Treasury that the production of a film would be of value to the EMB's project. The modest commercial and critical success of *Drifters* was enough to convince the government that establishing a film arm of the EMB would be valuable and from 1930 to 1933 this film unit produced over a hundred films, all concerned with some element of the British Empire.

<sup>50</sup> Grierson's choice of the herring fishing industry as a focus for his first film was motivated in part by political expedience—the individual with the authority to allocate funding for the film was an advocate of the industry (Swann, 1989: 30). But Grierson was also explicit in identifying the dramatic narrative structure inherent within the film's subject matter as one of the qualities that attracted him to it: 'If you can tell me a story more plainly dramatic than the gathering of the ships for the herring season, the going out, the shooting at evening, the long drift in the night, the hauling of the nets by infinite agony of shoulder muscle in the teeth of a storm, the drive home against a head sea, and (for finale) the frenzy of a market in which said agonies are sold at ten shillings a thousand [...] if you can tell me a story with a better crescendo in energies, images, atmospherics [...] I shall make my next film of it forthwith' (Grierson, 1929/1998b: 78).

container ships. This simple narrative is embellished with a series of intertitles that provide additional information and exposition. Mirroring the character of the film as a whole, the language used in these intertitles is a combination of poetic and informational. They tell us, for instance, how much herring has been caught and how many hours labour was involved in the process. But they also position the work of the fishermen as a kind of grand and noble struggle against nature, creating an idealised image of what Grierson called ‘the high bravery of upstanding labour’ (Grierson, 1932/1998c: 89).

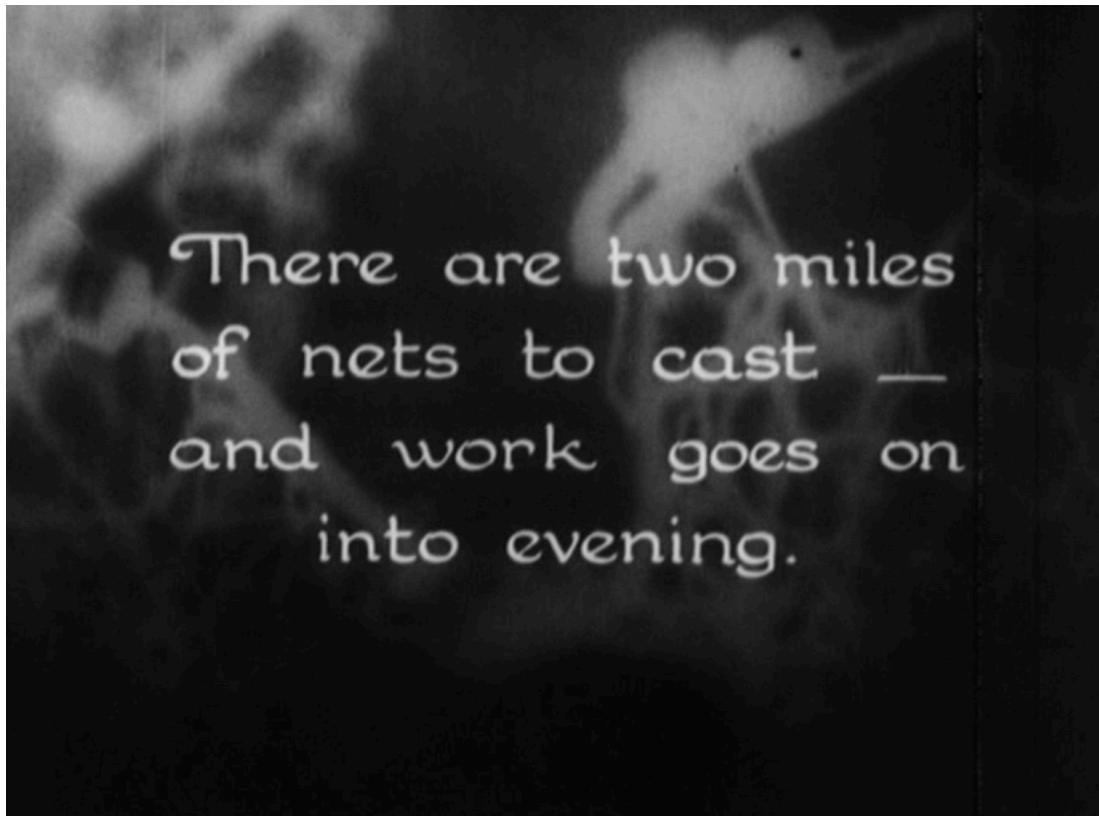


Fig. 7. Informational intertitles.

Source: John Grierson's *Drifters* (1929)

Throughout *Drifters* the labour of the crew and the demanding physicality of their job is consistently underscored, both through the film's visuals and in a number of celebratory intertitles. The film emphasises the 'nobility' of the men's work as well as the inherent drama and tension of the fishing voyage through a variety of cinematic techniques. The film's principal message—of the dignity and importance of the fishermen's work—is partly communicated through the intertitles and partly through the film's images and its editing strategy. This message is communicated particularly potently through the juxtaposition of images of the men and the boat—with its powerful, chugging engines—with images of the crashing waves. Through cutting between these



images (and at times the images are also superimposed on top of one another) a parallel is drawn between the mechanised power of the ship's engine, and the elemental force of the sea. As the bow of the trawler cuts through the water and huge waves crash alongside it, the ship—and by extension the fishermen—are cast as a strong and powerful force overcoming nature. All of this brave and noble effort is then, in the film's final minutes, subsumed by what the film implies is the greater task of cementing British industry's position in a global marketplace. Or as one of the film's final intertitles reads: 'And the sound of the sea, and the people of the sea are lost to the chatter and chaffer of a market for the world.' Almost ten minutes is dedicated to the final sequence which depicts the fish market and the subsequent transport of the day's catch elsewhere, emphasising the larger context that surrounds the industry. Dissolves from the shots of the market to shots of the trawler and the sea at this point remind us once more of the significance of the fishermen's labour to this process, reiterating their place as one part of a complex interconnected system.



Fig. 8. Preparing the catch for a market for the world.

Source: John Grierson's *Drifters* (1929)

As Ian Aitken notes, *Drifters* was a rather different film to that which its sponsors had expected: instead of a 'straightforward publicity film' it was a 'poetic montage documentary, which drew heavily on the filmmaking styles of Sergei Eisenstein and Robert Flaherty' (Aitken, 1998: 10). Much

of the critical commentary on the film has focused on the way Grierson's film combines these two rather different approaches to non-fiction cinema from the period. For instance, Grimshaw notes that the film 'effectively synthesises Flaherty's celebration of people in the landscape with the Russian preoccupation with industry, technology and rhythm' (Grimshaw, 2001: 61). Likewise, Betsy McLane sees *Drifters* as evidence of Grierson as a brilliant synthesist: 'the loving long takes of a Flaherty are cut up and banged together in Eisensteinian montage to provide a modern dynamism, and the individual accomplishments of Nanook are replaced by the collective efforts of a crew, as in *Potemkin*' (McLane, 2012: 80).<sup>51</sup> However, while *Drifters*' editing strategy certainly borrows heavily from Eisenstein's dynamic formalism, the film is by no means politically radical in the way that *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) or *Strike* (1925) were. The film's montage editing gives the film a rhythm and energy that is similar to those films, but the political agitation that is central to both is entirely missing from *Drifters*. As Harvey O'Brien notes, the relationship between the labour of the workers and broader societal forces is not positioned within a radical dialectical framework, but by a 'simpler, more mechanical attempt to illustrate the process of production (fishing) in an informative, expository and educational way' (O'Brien, 2013: 221). The fundamental motivating logic behind *Drifters* is the desire to illustrate and illuminate the industrial practice shown in the film in a clear, rational, coherent way. In other words, although it contains certain impressionistic elements, its primary interest is the communication of what we might call propositional knowledge about the herring fishing industry to an audience. *Drifters* then, is an example of the documentary movement's work that contains elements which are both expository and impressionistic/poetic. *Housing Problems* (1935) meanwhile, represents British documentary at its most unambiguously instrumental and didactic. It is a clear example of a film that 'tells' rather than 'shows'.<sup>52</sup>

### 3.2. *Housing Problems*

Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton's *Housing Problems* focuses on the issue of slum housing. It depicts the poor conditions of those living in Britain's slums and then suggests a possible solution to this problem in the form of new housing developments that were being built at the time in places like

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<sup>51</sup> Grierson, who at the time he made *Drifters* had little experience in filmmaking, freely admitted this influence: 'What I know of the cinema I have learned partly from the Russians [...] and partly from Flaherty' (Grierson, 1929/1998b: 78-79).

<sup>52</sup> Silvio Carta describes the former as follows: 'A film that "tells" is a film that promotes the didactic oral pronouncements of a narrator. It provides guidance concerning what the viewers should think and what conclusions they should draw. It is easy to point to the didactic functions of the disembodied word in these films. Their tendency is to voice the authority and ideological agenda of an oral commentary' (Carta, 2015: 6).

Leeds. Sponsored by the British Commercial Gas Association, *Housing Problems* has much in common with other documentary movement work produced with sponsorship from the oil and gas industries.<sup>53</sup> These films were produced with the intent of increasing public awareness of contemporary social problems, provoking discussion, and suggesting attitudes that might contribute towards the solution of such problems (McLane, 2012: 79). These socially purposive documentaries all fall strongly on the informational rather than the aesthetic side of the documentary movement's output. Through their use of image, sound and editing they emphasise the transfer of propositional knowledge and the construction of a coherent and logical argument. Even amongst these social reportage films though, *Housing Problems* remains striking for its commitment to 'unaesthetic' representational techniques.

Several commentators have pointed to the 'plainness' of the film's style. Martin Stollery for instance, notes that the film achieves its impact through 'an austerity of means' and 'utilitarian' cinematography and editing (Stollery, 2013a: 377). Similarly, John Corner describes the film as a 'tightly referential exercise in description and exposition' that aims for a 'maximum transparency' of communication (Corner, 1996: 63-70). The film's simple structure and form is in many ways typical of the rhetorical, argument driven style of the 'expository mode' of documentary. As I noted in my Introduction, expository documentaries, in Nichols' terms, are films that address the viewer directly with voices or titles that advance an argument about the historical world; they also typically take shape around the solution to a problem or puzzle (Nichols, 1991: 34-38). As in many expository documentaries, the central communicative device in *Housing Problems* is the voice. The film presents its tightly structured argument principally through a combination of voice-over commentary and direct to camera interviews with people living in the slums. Throughout the film images play a supportive and illustrative role. They provide direct evidence of what is being discussed in the commentary. I will explore the implications of this emphasis on the verbal for the kind of knowledge that the film communicates in more detail below. First though, it is worth looking more broadly at the other techniques the film uses in order to communicate information and make its argument.

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<sup>53</sup> Other films of this type include *Enough to Eat* (1936), *The Smoke Menace* (1937) and *Children at School* (1937).

*Housing Problems* begins with a series of long shots showing a densely built up urban area. We see tightly packed buildings with crooked roofs and sloping walls, and a building surrounded by scaffolding being dismantled by labourers. A voice-over introduces us to the central topic of the film before signposting what will become the film's core formal device: the spoken testimony of the slum dwellers themselves. This well-spoken male voice addresses the audience directly, saying: 'A great deal these days is written about the problem of the slums. This film is going to introduce you to some of the people really concerned'. This language—straightforward and unadorned—is typical of the style and tone of the film as a whole. It is also typical of what has become known as the 'voice of God' narrator. That is, an unseen, or disembodied, voice that acts as an authoritative guide who 'speaks on behalf of the text' (Nichols, 1991: 37). The term, as Stella Bruzzi notes, harbours various insinuations of 'patriarchy, dominance and omniscience' (Bruzzi, 2006: 49). 'Voice-of-god' style narration has been heavily criticised for being overly didactic and dictatorial; 'the ultimate tool for telling people what to think' (Bruzzi, 2006: 50).<sup>54</sup>



Fig. 9. A densely packed urban area. Source: Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey's *Housing Problems* (1935)

<sup>54</sup> As Bruzzi correctly points out, this criticism obscures a tradition of more poetic, nuanced or ironic usages of voice-over; Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) for instance, features a female voice-over whose oblique and poetic musings on the nature of memory subverts the archetypal 'solid' or omniscient male narrator (Bruzzi, 2006: 47). *Housing Problems* though, is a clear example of the latter rather than the former.

This first narrator then introduces us to an ‘expert’ with direct knowledge of the problem: a Councillor Lauder, Chairman of Stepney Housing Committee. He will be our main guide through the remainder of the short film. This new voice describes the origins of slum housing and explains why the buildings are of such poor quality. As with the preceding ‘voice-of-god’ narrator, there is a direct link between the words spoken by this ‘voice-of-authority’ and the images seen on the screen. ‘Here are some pictures of typical slum architecture’ he says, as we see images of crooked and decaying buildings. Both the voice of god and voice of authority narrators are constructed as sober, rational, experts who clearly and calmly explain the situation. They are the source of knowledge that is passed on to the viewer. There remains little room for interpretation within this framework, we are told what to think, rather than attempting to construct an understanding for ourselves based on what we see. The film provides its own conclusions to us, it is closed rather than open ended.

Next we hear from the people who live in the slums themselves, we are shown inside the slums and see the cramped and overcrowded conditions, the damp and mouldy walls and the crumbling plasterwork. The people talk of having to cook, eat and sleep in the same room and of problems with infestation, both rats and insects. ‘The vermin in the walls is wicked and I tell ye we’re fed up!’ says one interviewee. These sequences are typically filmed in a static medium shot, with the individuals talking directly into camera, framed by their dilapidated domestic environments. Anstey claimed that the film’s aesthetic restraint was a deliberate strategy, one which was intended to privilege the testimony and perspective of the film’s subjects above any kind of directorial intervention (Sussex, 1975: 62). He claimed to be giving the slum dwellers ‘a chance to make their own film’. ‘This is why we kept all the aesthetics out until the very end’, he said, ‘what we felt was “this is their film not ours”’ (Anstey quoted in Corner, 1996: 68).<sup>55</sup> In many ways this mirrors the emphasis on ‘plain style’ ethnographic filmmaking discussed in the previous chapter. Both strategies rely on a similar belief in the idea that a film made with the least amount of creative intervention produces the ‘truest’ or most authentic results. In both cases, the result is the communication of a kind of knowledge that is most easily expressed through words, a knowledge that ‘travels from one mind to another’ (Nichols, 1994b: 65).

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<sup>55</sup> Of course the extent to which this is true is very much open to debate. Corner notes that even though the film’s commentary places the slum dweller’s testimony as a ‘principal component of the “evidence” [...] The main expositional project is the progress being made in slum clearance as a result of the co-operation of planners, architects and local authorities’ (Corner, 1996: 69). The slum dweller’s testimony is therefore there primarily, Corner argues, to add ‘subjective experience’ to ‘objective conditions’ (Corner, 1996: 69).



Fig. 10. Direct to camera testimony. Source: Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey's *Housing Problems* (1935)

#### 4. THE POETIC/PHENOMENAL TENDENCY

The final two films I am going to discuss in this chapter are Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934) and Grierson's short film *Granton Trawler* (1934). The first is one of the most celebrated 'poetic' films of the British documentary movement. It sits squarely on the aesthetic side of the movement's output, and its structure closely echoes that of the city symphony film—it is centred around a particular geographical location and it attempts to convey something of the 'rhythm' and 'feel' of that particular place. The second film, *Granton Trawler*, I have chosen in part because it deals with the same subject matter as *Drifters*, but in a rather different manner. The film also depicts the labour of fishermen, but it does so without intertitles or commentary, eschewing the epic rhetorical elements of the earlier film. It also appears far less interested in communicating information about the fishing voyage and more concerned with the physical, phenomenological aspects of the environment it depicts. I see *Song of Ceylon* and *Granton Trawler* as representative of what I think of as the documentary movement's poetic/phenomenal tendency.

#### 4.1. *Song of Ceylon*

Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* impressionistically depicts the cultural life and religious customs of the inhabitants of the South Asian island of Sri Lanka (formerly British Ceylon). In addition to this, the film also shows the impact of industrialisation, as well as somewhat obliquely commenting on the effects of European colonisation on the country. Though originally conceived as a work of propaganda for Ceylon's tea industry, the film transcended its commercial origins to become one of the most critically admired films associated with the British documentary movement. Wright's film took home one of the top prizes at the 1935 Brussels International Film Festival, and in a review of the film for *The Spectator*, the author Graham Greene described it as 'an example to all directors of perfect construction and the perfect application of montage' (Greene, 1935/1993). As Jon Hoare notes, even at the time of its release the film was celebrated 'for its significance as an art film, not for its contribution to Empire tea marketing' (Hoare, 2010). For his part, Wright was always more interested in producing a creative work of art than an exercise in industrial marketing or imperial propaganda. Nor for that matter, it should be noted, does it seem that he was especially interested in producing a critique of exploitative colonial practices. When Aitken asked Wright in an interview in the early eighties whether he was an 'Empire enthusiast' and if he was supportive of the Empire Marketing Board's project, Wright replied rather colourfully: 'I couldn't give a fuck about the EMB. I wanted to make films, and to begin with I was mainly interested in film aesthetics' (Aitken, 1998: 245).

Grierson once described Wright, who was one of the core members of the documentary movement, as a 'poet' (Orbanz, 1977: 133). Elsewhere, he also compared him to a painter, noting: 'As with good painters, there is character in his line and attitude in his composition' (Grierson, 1932/1998c: 90).<sup>56</sup> Of course given that the tea pickers of Sri Lanka were one of what Brian Winston calls the most 'persistently and perniciously exploited groups of all non-European workers' (Winston, 2008: 30) the emphasis on art-making at the expense of a critical engagement with the social and political issues raised by the film's subject matter may be seen, as Winston himself does, as deeply

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<sup>56</sup> Along with *Song of Ceylon*, which he considered to be his best film, Wright also co-directed another of the documentary movement's most celebrated and poetically inclined works, 1936's *Night Mail*. In contrast to *Song of Ceylon*, *Night Mail* has a much more conventional narrative structure. *Night Mail* is an example of the 'story form' of British documentary film, or what Betsy McLane (2012) identifies as the 'narrative' documentary. These films shaped documentary elements (location shooting, non-actors and the message or interests of a particular sponsor—in the case of *Night Mail* this was the postal service) into a film with a plot, character and theme.

problematic. *Song of Ceylon* is certainly equivocal in terms of its political and ideological commitments. Though the film is sympathetic in its presentation of the Sinhalese and their cultural practices, its production was nonetheless deeply imbricated within a system of colonial exploitation. The film's portrayal of British colonial rule in Ceylon is at best ambivalent, and certainly never explicitly critical. William Guynn highlights this aspect of the film when he describes it as 'a dissonant text', one which is 'the locus of conflicts of an ideological nature' (Guynn, 2014: 65).

In making the film, Wright, along with his assistant director John Taylor, spent a month in Ceylon before shooting began, researching and 'reading everything [they] could' about the island (Wright quoted in Aitken, 1998: 248). The island's religious practices, and Buddhism in particular, made a deep impression on them both. Wright speaks of being impressed by the 'depth and contemplative nature,' of Buddhism, and of his desire to 'put that feeling into *Song of Ceylon*' (Wright quoted in Aitken, 1998: 248). As Martin Stollery has noted, the film presents this 'essence of Ceylon' as something that is intangible and perhaps ultimately inscrutable, something that is 'felt rather than something which can be fully explained through rational exposition' (Stollery, 2013b: 855). In conveying this 'feeling' or 'essence' the film uses a cinematic palette which differs markedly from the 'maximum transparency' approach of *Housing Problems*, with its 'utilitarian' cinematography and its use of talking heads and direct address voice-of-god style narrators. By contrast, in *Song of Ceylon* we find a rather different arsenal of cinematic techniques.

*Song of Ceylon* consists of four distinct sections, entitled 'The Buddha', 'The Virgin Island', 'The Voices of Commerce' and 'The Apparel of a God' respectively. The first section, 'The Buddha', deals primarily with religion. The emphasis that Wright places on the significance of Buddhism on the island is evident throughout the film, though it is particularly apparent in this first section. Here we see pilgrims make their way up the slopes of the mountain Adam's Peak (also known as Sri Pada, or sacred footprint). The voice-over commentary informs us that at the top of this mountain there is a stone with 'a print of a foot like a man's on it' that is believed to be the footprint of the Buddha. The pilgrims make their way to this site then sit down to rest, chanting in the Buddha's honour. The second section, 'The Virgin Island', is dominated by images of traditional community life in which there appears little distinction between labour and leisure. Villagers draw water from a well, fishermen cast their nets inshore, and we see women washing clothes and harvesting rice, and a



group of children attending a traditional dancing class. The section closes with a group of villagers apparently engaged in easy conversation, smiling and laughing. The third section, 'The Voices of Commerce', features the first images of modernity in the film. The sequence opens with a tracking shot from the side of a moving train, the landscape rushing past outside the window. We then see an elephant knocking down a tree, clearing the way for a new road. This image is accompanied by the rhythmic and harshly industrial noise of a train. We then see a kaleidoscope of images of trade and industry accompanied on the soundtrack by a cacophony of voices (a layered collage of mostly British voices reads out the market prices of various goods and services), electronic beeping, and an urgent orchestral score. Other shots in this section show tug boats and machines, lorries and carts, tea picking on an industrial scale, a radio mast, crates being loaded onto ships, and the modern buildings and streets of the island's commercial capital, Colombo. Then in the fourth and final section, 'The Apparel of a God', we return once again to nature, community, religious life and tradition. We see men riding on elephants returning to a village, fishing canoes, and giant stone statues of the Buddha. The film closes with a lyrical, rhythmic sequence that intercuts shots of energetic dancers and drummers in traditional costume with further close-up images of the huge stone statues of the Buddha.

The most striking difference between *Song of Ceylon* and a film like *Housing Problems* is the former's black and white imagery. In contrast to the static, utilitarian cinematography of the latter, *Song of Ceylon's* cinematography is beautiful, dynamic and artfully composed. The film is full of vibrant, rhythmic images of dancing and celebration, as well as birds in flight, flowing water, and the island's verdant landscape. Wright also has a distinctive way of framing individual figures from below, surrounded by nothing but sky. This strategy has the effect of transfiguring the (typically male) body into something monumental—like the huge stone statues of the Buddha that also appear frequently throughout the film. These statues also often fill the whole of the frame. Stollery suggests that these painterly images present Ceylon as 'a domain of calm and beauty, ease and grace' (Stollery, 2013b: 854).<sup>57</sup> This Orientalist vision is further accentuated by the graceful, fluid movement of Wright's camera. Beyond this aesthetic use of the camera though, the film's principal innovation—and the one aspect of the film that comes closest to undercutting or challenging this

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<sup>57</sup> Stollery also suggests that Wright's other Empire films take a similar approach: 'They romanticise non-Western cultures as appealing yet tantalisingly inaccessible repositories of sensuality and traditional wisdom' (Stollery, 2013c: 1019).

eroticising, exoticising vision of the Sinhalese—was not its visual style, but its soundtrack. Wright notably described the film as ‘an experiment with sound’ (Wright quoted in Aitken, 1998: 248), and this quality comes across most clearly in the ‘Voices of Commerce’ section described above. This section has a distinctly modernist aesthetic in its collage of speech, industrial noise and orchestral music.



Fig. 11. The body transfigured.

Source: Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934)

Though Stuart Hood has claimed that Wright's film ‘totally avoids the question of colonial labour and the economic exploitation of the colonies’ (Hood, 1983: 101), several commentators have drawn attention to the implied critique apparent in the ‘Voices of Commerce’ section. Aitken for instance, remarks that it carries ‘implicit but nonetheless significant comment on the low industrial status of native labour’ on the island (Aitken, 1998: 165). Certainly this section, with its chaotic and abrasive mix of sounds, does not give the impression of colonial industry as entirely benign. Paul Rotha, a contemporary of Wright's and a documentary filmmaker briefly associated with Grierson and the documentary movement, described the sequence as follows:

The rhythmic noise of a mountain train is continued over an elephant pushing down a tree, an association of power and at the same time a comment. The market prices of tea, spoken by radio-announcer and dictated in letter form by business executives are overlaid on scenes of natives

picking in the tea gardens, the ‘Yours truly’ and ‘Your obedient servant’ of the dictation being ironically synchronised over the natives at their respective tasks. (Rotha, 1935: 222)

William Guynn, in his critique of the film, agrees with Rotha’s assessment to a point, writing that ‘the disembodied speech and its businesslike tones form a counterpoint to the images of the Ceylonese at work and suggest the callous nature of colonial exploitation’ (Guynn, 2014: 94). However, he suggests that this criticism remains rather too subtle and oblique, implicit rather than fully developed.

Alongside this sonic experimentation, the film also makes more conventional use of sound in the shape of a voice-over commentary. However, even this is subtly subversive and rather different from the use of the voice found in *Housing Problems*. *Song of Ceylon*’s voice-over is spoken by Lionel Wendt, a Ceylon native descended from European colonisers, and the words he reads are drawn from an account written in 1681 of the island and its inhabitants by the English trader Robert Knox. The use of Knox’s words laid over images of Ceylon in the 1930s has a number of effects. Unlike the voice-of-god style narration of *Housing Problems* that speaks from a sense of omniscience, *Song of Ceylon*’s narration ‘does not speak with unambiguous authority in relation to the images on screen’ (Hoare, 2010). Hoare argues that using Knox’s words against the images filmed in 1934 invites the audience to question the authority of this historical narration:

Wright, like Knox, is yet another European recording his account of the island. Rather than simply stressing continuity with the past and the timelessness of Ceylon, the narration demonstrates the ongoing colonial presence of Europeans’ and implicitly questions and draws attention to ‘their ability to speak for the island and its people. (Hoare, 2010)

Ultimately, unlike *Drifters* and *Housing Problems*, which suggest that the world is knowable and coherent, *Song of Ceylon* suggests that the world, or at least *this* world, is inscrutable and inaccessible (at least to the Western eye). Certainly, the film seems less interested in communicating ‘solid’ propositional knowledge about Ceylon than we might expect from a film within the Griersonian tradition. This quality is perhaps most vividly demonstrated in the film’s final moments, which depict the performance of a traditional dance.



Fig. 12. The body in motion.

Source: Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934)

In this final rhythmic, physical, energetic sequence, Wendt's voice-over drops out altogether. Instead the images and the music take precedence and Wright's 'anticipatory camera movements [...] incorporate the viewer into the rhythms of the dancer's movements' (Stollery, 2013b: 856). This focus on an embodied, physical and evocative aesthetic is also found in Grierson's *Granton Trawler*.

#### 4.2. *Granton Trawler*

At just over ten minutes long, *Granton Trawler* is much shorter than the nearly hour-long *Drifters*. This shorter length may partly explain why the film has a looser, more evocative and lyrical style—its brevity providing Grierson with the licence to experiment without fear of losing the audience's interest. Compared to *Drifters* the film is a slighter, almost abstract work—a kind of tone piece.<sup>58</sup> As I noted in section 2.3, although Grierson remained concerned principally with the 'real', that is to say, the forces that underlie reality, he was nonetheless also interested in the phenomenological

<sup>58</sup> Grierson himself came to see the film as something of a requiem for the crew of the *Isabella Greig*, after the ship was destroyed by German submarines during the Second World War (Foxon, 2008: 33)

surface of reality. This comes across most clearly in this short film. After a short title sequence, we find ourselves immediately at sea on the small fishing trawler *Isabella Greig*. On the soundtrack we hear the blast of the ship's horn, wind blowing in the background, the sound of the ocean, the cranking of chains and the creaking of the ship. The fishermen shout and talk too, but their words are largely indistinct. Along with the sounds of the ocean and the boat these shouts become a part of the overall texture of the maritime environment that the film evokes.

While *Drifters* retains a structure that has a clear rhetorical and educational purpose, *Granton Trawler*'s 'message' or purpose is less clear. Its purpose seems to be to simply show us this world, and perhaps to convey something of the experience of being aboard the trawler. Throughout the film we see the slick of the fishermen's macs, the huge nets of fish hanging over the boat and being pulled in. We see the seagulls flying along side the boat, and the black water with its fringes of white spray. It is a textural, evocative film, rather than a textual, informational film. Like *Drifters* the film has a narrative structure suggested by the logic of the fishing voyage: the men go out to sea, they cast their nets, the nets are pulled in and the fish are gutted before the ship returns to port. It is a structure that comes from the rhythm of the event itself, rather than being imposed from outside. The film also has a tension and drama that arises from the men's dangerous, physical work. But here this structure and drama is more subtle and implicit than it is in *Drifters*. Furthermore, this tension and drama is much more closely tied to a phenomenological approach to documentary representation. In 'First Principles of Documentary', Grierson wrote that,

In a more ambitious and deeper description [in *Granton Trawler*] the tension might have included elements more intimately and more heavily descriptive of the clanging weight of the tackle, the strain on the ship, the operation of the gear underwater and along the ground, the scattering myriads of birds laying off in the gale. The fine fury of the ship and heavy weather could have been brought through to touch the vitals of the men and the ship... (Grierson, 1932/1998c: 91)

The film comes much closer than *Drifters* to achieving this deep description. In this regard, the most striking aspect of the film's style is the seasick bobbing of the camera as it moves with the rhythm of the sea. While filming on-board, Grierson's camera was also apparently repeatedly knocked on its side, and as a result of these accidents the camera captured a number of shots from oblique perspectives from the deck of the vessel—looking up directly at the sky, awash with seagulls, or pointed at the deep black of the ocean. Grierson was initially disappointed with the

resulting footage, and somewhat dejectedly passed it on to Edgar Anstey for him to attempt to shape some ‘sense’ out of it in the edit (Foxon, 2008: 32). Grierson’s understanding of film was such that the messy, chaotic, ‘poorly’ framed material that resulted from this situation was deemed unworkable. But this material is undoubtedly the most vivid and evocative within the film. With this material Anstey created ‘a storm in film terms’ (Foxon, 2008: 32).



Fig. 13. A storm in film terms.

Source: John Grierson’s *Granton Trawler* (1934)

The parallels with the Sensory Ethnography Lab’s *Leviathan* (2012) here are striking. *Granton Trawler*’s cinematic techniques, like *Leviathan*’s, convey a vivid sense of the physical experience of being on board the vessel. As Christopher Pavsek has observed, *Granton Trawler* not only ‘provides a thematic ancestor to *Leviathan*, but also developed a visual lexicon from which *Leviathan* borrows and which it updates for a hi-def world’ (Pavsek, 2015: 7). Grierson then, who often advanced a particular conception of documentary film as a primarily didactic, informational form, also produced a film that is a clear precursor to Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel’s work. However, while *Granton Trawler* emphasises the material, visceral, physical aspects of reality to a certain extent, the film’s world still ultimately appears logical, clear, coherent and knowable. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 5, the world presented in *Leviathan* is at times much more radically

disorientating, and its formal strategies are much more abstract and fragmentary. It is precisely this abstract, fragmentary aesthetic that I suggest is primarily responsible for the film's engagement with an embodied, non-propositional form of knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter aimed to demonstrate that within the films of the British documentary movement, which are often cited as examples of a kind of documentary filmmaking that is concerned principally with the transmission and acquisition of what we can think of as 'propositional' knowledge, there is also a significant undercurrent of formal and aesthetic experimentation that prefigures later approaches to documentary with rather different underlying epistemological commitments. I demonstrated that some Griersonian documentaries were primarily concerned with the consolidation and communication of what was already known, and these films typically utilise techniques that are borne of a desire to find the most efficient way of communicating this knowledge to an audience. However, some films, such as those explored in **section 4**, use cinematic techniques that clearly diverge from this intention. In Part 2 of this thesis I move on to discuss those documentary filmmakers who expanded on the approach of the latter kind of Griersonian documentary. These filmmakers moved away from didactic, instrumental and expository approaches to documentary film. In the following chapter I analyse a number of films by Jean Rouch and David and Judith MacDougall. Rouch and the MacDougalls' work differs in important respects, but as I will demonstrate, all three filmmakers can be thought of as individuals committed to a style of filmmaking motivated by the notion of 'showing' rather than 'telling'. As a result of this emphasis, the cinematic techniques their films utilise privilege different ways of knowing to a film that 'tells'. This understanding of the approach taken by the films I analyse in the following two chapters helps to inform my understanding of the relationship between cinematic techniques and knowledge in *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* by providing a framework for understanding knowledge as more than simply that which can be communicated through written or spoken language.

## PART TWO

### REVELATORY FILM: EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE



## CHAPTER THREE

### CHALLENGING EXPOSITORY APPROACHES: *CINÉMA VÉRITÉ* AND OBSERVATIONAL CINEMA

There are a few rare moments when the filmgoer suddenly understands an unknown language without the help of subtitles, when he participates in strange ceremonies, when he finds himself walking in towns or across terrain that he has never seen before but that he recognises perfectly [...] A miracle such as this could only be produced by the cinema.

- Jean Rouch (1975/2003a: 85)

No other art form can capture so well the look in the eye, the feeling in an expression, the thoughts that go unspoken between the words.

- Roger Ebert (2003: 471)

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In this chapter I discuss three filmmakers whose work challenged the epistemological assumptions underlying the approaches discussed in Part 1 of this thesis. Jean Rouch, and David and Judith MacDougall were integral to the development of two related movements within documentary and ethnographic film: ‘*cinéma vérité*’ and ‘observational cinema’ respectively. Rouch’s most celebrated work, made in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the MacDougalls’ work, beginning in the 1970s, represented a repudiation of the instrumental, expository, and didactic approach to documentary, as well as a significant challenge to the assumptions underlying the scientific paradigm in ethnographic film. The epistemological positions they articulated, and that are embodied in the formal strategies of their work, differ in important respects. But there are also many areas of commonalities between their two projects. The primary films under consideration in this chapter are Rouch’s films *Moi, un noir* (1958) and *Chronique d’un été* (1961), the MacDougalls’ *To Live With Herds* (1972), and David MacDougall’s *Doon School Chronicles* (2000). Both Rouch and the MacDougalls conceived of the role of the camera in these films in a different way to those filmmakers discussed in Part 1, and the films themselves embody different ways of knowing.

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## 1. A NEW KIND OF OBSERVATIONAL APPROACH

As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, at the core of Margaret Mead's approach to filmmaking was a conception of the camera as an impartial recording instrument, and a belief in the need to capture ostensibly objective 'data' through a process of detached, non-interventionist observation filming. Observation was also a central tenet of a cluster of filmmaking approaches in documentary and ethnographic cinema that developed in North America and Europe during the 1960s and 1970s (Henley, 2000: 213). But the understanding of observation advanced by the practitioners of these approaches differed greatly from Mead's. Known variously as *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema, and observational cinema, these approaches challenged the assumptions underlying both the scientific/documentation approach within ethnographic film exemplified by Mead explored in Chapter 1, and the didactic, expository tendency of Griersonian documentary explored in Chapter 2. Filmmakers committed to this new paradigm of observational filmmaking broke with both of these earlier models, pioneering a new kind of practice based on different underlying epistemological assumptions (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: x). The kinds of cinematic techniques the practitioners of these approaches utilised differed greatly from those advocated by Mead, as well as from those common within the 'maximum transparency' strand of Griersonian documentary.

The films by Jean Rouch and David and Judith MacDougall explored in this chapter all evince an understanding of the camera as more than simply a passive recording device. As these new approaches were developing, concerns about objectivity were increasingly being called into question. Even by the time Mead had published her essay 'Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words' (1975/2003)—in which she makes her pronouncements about the need for what Eliot Weinberger (1992: 38) calls a 'panopticon with limitless film'—filmmakers were beginning to view the positivist assumptions that undergirded the scientific documentation approach as outmoded and naive.<sup>59</sup> Rouch and the MacDougalls saw the role of the camera, as well as their own role as

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<sup>59</sup> Ironically, although they were initially hailed as a radical departure from earlier approaches, many people eventually came to see observational filmmaking styles as simply another form of scientism, 'in which a supposedly detached camera served to objectify and dehumanise the human subjects of its gaze' (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: x). But as Grimshaw & Ravetz argue convincingly, the claims of 'naive realism' that have been levelled against observational cinema in particular ignore the way in which practitioners like the MacDougalls actually conceived of their work.

filmmakers, very differently. Alongside a rejection of the claim that the camera was an objective recording device, they also did not believe that their own position was that of the impartial scientific observer. Instead they framed their role as one of inserting themselves into the worlds of their subjects. As Paul Henley notes, the kind of observation that these filmmakers advocated was ‘a process of observation that arose from active participation in the protagonists’ lives rather than being the sort carried out from some sort of remote watchtower as envisioned by Mead’ (Henley, 2000: 213). These filmmakers relinquished their ‘privileged perspective in favour of an openness to being shaped by particular situations and the relationships they encountered’ (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: x).

### 1.1. A Technological and Epistemological Revolution

This cluster of new observational filmmaking approaches were all borne out of similar changes in filmmaking technology that occurred in North America and Europe in the post-war period. Beginning in the late 1950s, major technical breakthroughs in camera and audio recording equipment began to permit the simultaneous, synchronous recording of sound and image outside of the confines of the studio (McLane, 2012: 219). At the same time, the development of new and relatively lightweight handheld cameras also allowed filmmakers to liberate the camera from its static position on a tripod. 16mm cameras like the Arriflex and the Auricon, and audio tape recorders like the Nagra could be handled easily by one person, without cables attaching the two together (Nichols, 2010: 172). Prior to this, film cameras that were light enough to be used by hand had no capacity to record synchronised sound. If sound was desired, any footage shot would need to be overdubbed later with sounds recorded separately to the image. This new technology therefore enabled a previously unattainable freedom of camera movement, paired with the recording of live, on location, synchronous sound. As Bill Nichols notes, ‘the camera and tape recorder could move freely about a scene and record what happened *as it happened*’ (Nichols, 2010: 172, emphasis added). Taking advantage of these technological developments, the films associated with this ‘observational turn’ (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: x) typically display an emphasis on formal and methodological strategies such as synchronous sound, natural settings and on-location shooting (as opposed to filming social actors in a studio where they could be wired for sound), an avoidance of voice-over narration, and an insistence on ‘first takes’ without asking subjects to repeat behaviour or actions (Feld, 2003: 15). These strategies all provide the films with a strong impression of

immediacy and intimacy—a sense of a direct contact with the film’s living, breathing subjects. They impart a feeling of ‘being there’, with the viewer becoming a kind of unseen spectator watching things unfold moment by moment.

As well as facilitating these new formal strategies, these technological developments also meant that places previously inaccessible to cameras—and by extension the people and stories contained in those places—were now open to documentary film crews. In the ‘direct cinema’ tradition, most closely associated with filmmaking activity in North America, this included everyone from politicians on the campaign trail in *Primary* (1960), to bible salesmen plying their trade in Florida and New England in *Salesman* (1969). *Primary* documents the 1960 Wisconsin Democratic presidential primary election—in which senator John F. Kennedy was the winning candidate—with an access to each candidate’s public appearances and activities that would have been impossible with older film technology. Meanwhile, within the French iteration of this observational moment, known as *cinéma vérité*, this new technology was first used to cast a mobile eye (and ear) upon the world of a group of Parisians living and working in the French capital during the summer of 1960. Crucially for Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, Rouch’s collaborator on *Chronique d’un été* (1961), this new technology meant that they were able to record the thoughts, opinions and reactions of these Parisians—as expressed in conversations and interviews—in an impromptu, unrehearsed manner, while simultaneously filming their actions, gestures and facial expressions.

Emerging in the 1970s, slightly later than direct and *vérité*, was the practice known as ‘observational cinema’. The term was originally coined to refer specifically to a distinct style of ethnographic filmmaking that emerged out of a dialogue between anthropologists and documentary filmmakers (Sandall, 1972; Young, 1975/2003). In the 1975 article that definitively named this new style, Colin Young provides an account of the work that his colleagues and students at UCLA were making at the time. David and Judith MacDougall both trained in filmmaking at UCLA in the late 1960s, and were part of this new trend. In his article Young linked observational cinema to Rouch’s work, as well as to the post-war Italian neorealist filmmakers (Young, 1975/2003). Today, observational cinema remains one of the most common modes of ethnographic filmmaking, to the point where it often seems ‘synonymous with the genre of ethnographic film itself’ (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: ix). Observational films, as MacDougall noted in an article written a few years after the release of his

film *To Live With Herds* (1972), focus upon ‘discrete events rather than upon mental constructs or impressions’ and they seek to ‘render faithfully the natural sounds, structure, and duration of events’ (MacDougall, 1975/2003: 116). In doing so they typically employ a ‘resolutely realist’ style, one that aims for ‘the preservation of the link with a real time experience’ (Carta, 2015: 2).

This might sound close in character to the ‘whole bodies’ approach outlined in Chapter 1, but there are a number of significant differences. Firstly, all of these approaches share a commitment to the principle of ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’. As Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz (2009) note in their recent monograph tracing the history and origins of observational cinema, what this commitment to ‘show’ rather than to ‘tell’ meant in practice is that these films typically eschewed the expository techniques of the Griersonian tradition and the disembodied, objectifying voice-overs found in ethnographic films in the Mead-Bateson tradition: ‘in place of narrated films with their summary and expert opinion, audiences were [instead] presented with materials generated from recording events, situations, and relationships as they unfolded in specific social and cultural contexts’ (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 24-50). This rejection of ‘narration’—particularly as represented by the voice of the omniscient, almost invariably white male, narrator—was a crucial element of the aesthetic and, Grimshaw and Ravetz argue, the *epistemology* of this new observational moment. In place of being told what to think, audiences were expected to engage with the films in a more active manner. Filmmakers like the MacDougalls sought to ‘preserve the integrity of events witnessed, while simultaneously inviting viewers to engage with the materials on their own terms’ (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 83).

## 1.2. Differences in Approach

Although they utilised similar formal strategies and all grew out of the same technological developments, direct cinema, *cinéma vérité* and observational cinema differed from each other in a number of important ways. Most significantly, they each articulated their commitment to ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’ with varying degrees of emphasis on issues of objectivity and impartiality. For the direct cinema filmmakers for instance, the new developments in camera and audio recording technology made possible work that they believed was closer to reality than what they thought of as the ‘highly mediated’ films of their Griersonian predecessors (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 25). In

their rhetoric at least, they stressed that theirs was a form of filmmaking that was somehow more authentic or closer to the ‘truth’ than the forms of documentary filmmaking that had come before. They believed that these new advances in filmmaking technology enabled documentary cinema to, as Stella Bruzzi puts it, ‘collapse the distance between reality and representation’ (Bruzzi, 2006: 8). As D.A. Pennebaker, one of the pioneers of direct cinema, suggested, the ideal was a situation in which the camera becomes ‘just a window someone peeps through’ (Pennebaker quoted in Winston, 1993: 43). The underlying motivating principle was the notion of nonintervention, and practitioners tried to film as if the cameraman were simply a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ (Feld, 2003: 16). This approach contrasted sharply with Jean Rouch’s view of the camera. As I will demonstrate, he saw the camera, and the presence of the filmmaker, as a kind of catalyst that would prompt behaviour that would not otherwise have taken place.

Erik Barnouw articulates the crux of this distinction between direct cinema and Rouch’s notion of *cinéma vérité* when he writes that: ‘the direct cinema artist aspired to invisibility, the Rouch *cinéma vérité* artist was often an avowed participant. The direct cinema artist played the role of uninvolved bystander; the *cinéma vérité* artist espoused that of provocateur’ (Barnouw, 1993: 255).<sup>60</sup> Likewise, in stark contrast to the rhetoric of the direct cinema filmmakers, practitioners of observational cinema—although stopping short of Rouch’s more radical provocation approach—insisted from the beginning that theirs was an ‘authored, reflexive practice in which the camera and crew were engaged with, not detached from, their subjects’ (Russell, 2011: 144). ‘Film’, wrote Colin Young in his seminal article on observational cinema, ‘is not objective. It may objectify but that is a different matter’ (Young, 1975/2003: 100). Practitioners of observational cinema recognised that all of the decisions they made—about what to film, how to film, when to film—were influenced by their own subjective, situated perspective. From the very beginning, filmmakers like David and Judith MacDougall were deeply cognisant of the way in which their presence, and their individual subjectivity, impacts the filmmaking process in multiple ways. As Silvio Carta notes,

It is absolutely misleading to assume that observational films advance truth claims that are independent from the personal response of the filmmaker to particular situations. Film testifies to

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<sup>60</sup> This notion of provocation also clearly distinguishes Rouch’s anthropological cinema from the work of filmmakers like Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson as well. In their case of course, their methodology rested on a belief that the camera could be used to record behaviour that would have taken place whether or not the camera, and filmmaker, was there.

directorial presence. It presupposes a subjective perspective rather than an objective observer with no preconceptions, since the “cameraman is selective in regard to time, focus, angle and framing of each shot” (Hockings, 2003: 515). It is undeniable that the personal curiosity of the filmmaker in observational films presupposes criteria of judgement, and that these criteria of judgement may influence the interpretation of events [...] However discreet, or cautious, the vision of the observational filmmaker is organised according to criteria of significance. Shots and angles in observational films are part of an interpretive process of selection. (Carta, 2015: 2-3)

This of course is also true of works of direct cinema. But the direct cinema filmmakers had a tendency to downplay the extent of the role of their own subjective perspective, and the impact of creative intervention and selectivity on their work. Notably though, in part because it is often conflated with direct cinema, observational cinema has at times been misunderstood as a practice that advocates filming ‘as if the camera were not there’ (MacDougall, 1975/2003: 125).<sup>61</sup> Observational cinema will be explored in more detail in the second half of this chapter when I turn to look in detail at the MacDougalls’ work. First though, I discuss cinéma vérité and the work of Jean Rouch. In this section I pay particular attention to the aspects of Rouch’s praxis that broke with established forms of documentary and ethnographic film, and explore the way in which the formal strategies of his films articulate different ways of knowing.

## 2. JEAN ROUCH AND THE CAMERA AS CATALYST

Jean Rouch (1917-2004) was a French filmmaker and anthropologist who is celebrated for his innovative work in documentary and ethnographic film. Rouch’s work crossed generic, disciplinary and conceptual boundaries. His films, as Paul Henley notes in his exhaustive monograph, *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema* (2010), are often praised for the way they problematise distinctions between such categories as ‘subjective experience and objective reality, self and other, Black and White, coloniser and colonised, fact and fiction’ (Henley, 2010: xvii). The iconoclastic nature of Rouch’s cinema can partly be attributed to the filmmaker’s distinctive personality. Rouch, by all accounts, was a playful, energetic figure, and his work bears the traces of his ‘fiercely individualistic spirit’ (Grimshaw, 2001: 91). He was also a prodigious filmmaker. According to his own estimates, he made between 130 and 140 films over the course of

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<sup>61</sup> Unlike the direct cinema filmmakers, who ‘loudly proclaimed a radical break with established cinematic principles’, practitioners of observational cinema were considerably less willing to ‘talk up’ their activities (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 53). The reluctance of the observational cinema contingent to self-mythologise may partly explain why it is the rhetoric of the direct cinema filmmakers that has had the firmest grip on the public imagination; a situation that has often led to the conflation of these similar, but subtly distinct filmmaking practices.

his long career (Henley, 2010: x). These run the gamut from the conventionally ethnographic (in the documentation-realist vein) to those which, as Henley argues, could only be described as ethnographic ‘by stretching this already very elastic term to breaking point’ (Henley, 2010: xii).<sup>62</sup> The films for which he is predominantly recognised though, particularly outside of specialist anthropological circles, are those he made in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

This body of work includes films such as his controversial documentary about a Hauka possession ritual: *Les maîtres fous* (1955); the ‘new experiment in cinéma vérité’ *Chronique d’un été* (1961), produced in collaboration with the sociologist Edgar Morin; and two of his most celebrated ‘ethno-fictions’: *Moi, un noir* (1958) and *Jaguar* (1965).<sup>63</sup> With this series of films, Rouch pursued what Grimshaw calls ‘a boldly experimental approach to cinematic form’ that ‘pushed into new areas of anthropological experience and knowledge’ (Grimshaw, 2001: 92). As Rouch’s most well known and celebrated films, these works have all been written about extensively and intelligently. But the contribution these films have made to shifting conceptions of anthropological knowledge, and to shifting conceptions of the role of the camera within documentary and ethnographic film, mean that they are of considerable importance to the central argument of this thesis. Rouch’s work, like Mead’s and like the work of the British documentarists, is an important coordinate on a map that illustrates how the way in which documentary and ethnographic filmmakers have thought about the purpose and function of the camera, and the relationship between cinematic techniques and knowledge, has shifted and evolved over time.

Rouch is perhaps best known within anglophone film scholarship for his influence on the filmmakers of the French New Wave. Jean-Luc Godard for instance, adopted many of Rouch’s filmmaking techniques in his own films. Of Godard’s early work, *Breathless (À bout de souffle*, 1961) reveals the influence of Rouch most clearly. As Henley notes, the stylistic similarities between *Breathless* and *Moi, un noir* were so great that one critic was prompted to describe the film as ‘a sort of *Moi, un blanc*’ (Henley, 2010: 176). Rouch’s films and the work of the French New Wave filmmakers also share an iconoclastic, youthful energy that stemmed from the same broad social

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<sup>62</sup> These films on broader subjects include a handful of short, interview based, portrait films. Notably, one of these is a touching and humorous work he made about Margaret Mead. The affectionately titled *Margaret Mead: A Portrait by a Friend* (1977) was filmed the year before Mead’s death, when Rouch was a guest of the first Margaret Mead Film Festival.

<sup>63</sup> Production on *Jaguar* started in the mid 1950s but the film was not completed and released until several years later.



and political changes, and they often explore similar thematic territory. *Chronique d'un été* for instance, deals partly with questions around the tension between romantic love and personal freedom—a characteristic concern of many French New Wave works too (Henley, 2010: 143). Although he remains better known in the francophone world, English language scholarship on Rouch has benefitted greatly in recent years from the publication of a number of thoughtful works. These include Henley's rigorously researched and elegantly written work, which explores the 'aesthetic, ethical, and [...] epistemological positions that [Rouch] associated, with varying degrees of explicitness, with [his films'] technical procedures' (Henley, 2010: xvii). Henley refers to this 'package of techniques, strategies, and artistic-philosophical postures' as Rouch's filmmaking 'praxis' (Henley, 2010: xviii). This has much in common with the concept of a worldview or 'metaphysic' that Grimshaw draws on in *The Ethnographer's Eye* (2001) and which I described in Chapter 1. Both notions have informed my understanding of Rouch's work, and more broadly, they have also helped me to conceptualise the relationship between the formal strategies that a filmmaker employs in their work, and their ideological and epistemological positions.

Other notable works on Rouch include Paul Stoller's *The Cinematic Griot: The Ethnography of Jean Rouch* (1992) which argues convincingly that there is a strong and significant link between Rouch's written ethnographic research and his filmic work. Stoller's book benefits greatly from a familiarity with the subject matter of Rouch's ethnography. Stoller himself is an anthropologist known amongst the Songhay, the West African people that Rouch dedicated much of the early part of his career to studying, as 'son of Rouch'. As Peter Loizos argues correctly, one of the strongest themes of Stoller's book is the way in which he identifies that Rouch was 'possessed by a desire to make Europeans face the limits of their scientific understanding of other cultures, to "decolonize themselves"' (Loizos, 1993: 48). Films like *Les maîtres fous* issued a provocative challenge to the distinctions that are typically drawn between Western scientific knowledge and indigenous epistemologies. Finally, Steven Feld's edited volume *Ciné-Ethnography* (2003) collects a number of important writings by Rouch himself, along with interviews and other materials that elucidate Rouch's thoughts on filmmaking and anthropology. My work in this chapter has also benefitted greatly from Grimshaw's insightful interpretation of Rouch's work in *The Ethnographer's Eye*, as well as Loizos's chapter on Rouch in *Innovation in Ethnographic Film* (1993). All of this scholarship makes a compelling case that, as Henley puts it, the 'very nature of ethnographic cinema—how it is

practised, how it is talked about, where its limits are deemed to lie—has been profoundly shaped by [Rouch]’ (Henley, 2010: ix).

Rouch’s filmmaking methodology broke from earlier models in a number of ways. Firstly, one of the most significant ways in which his approach differed from the positivist and non-interventionist assumptions of the scientific-tradition is that his films were often produced in close collaboration with his subjects. These collaborations also often involved improvisation and fantasy as a means of exploring the lives of his subjects/collaborators. For Rouch improvisation was a way of conveying something fundamental about real lives that might perhaps otherwise remain invisible or unspoken (Loizos, 1993: 50). Crucially, these improvisations and fantasies were primarily articulated through the subject’s own voice, often addressing the audience in the first person. Perhaps most distinctive though, was Rouch’s view of the function of the camera. As I noted in **section 1.2.**, for Rouch, the camera did more than simply record the action taking place in front of its lens without fundamentally affecting the behaviour of those being filmed. Instead, its power lay precisely in its ability to affect what happens in front of it. The ideal camera for Rouch was one that is ‘an active agent of investigation’ and the ideal camera user ‘an interrogator of the world’ (Loizos, 1993: 46). Rouch described this cinematic research method as a kind of ‘provocation’ filming (Feld, 1989: 239). Rouch saw the role of the camera as one of exploration. Loizos calls this a kind of ‘probing-through-interaction’,

which means that what you are watching on the screen would not often have happened if the filmmaker had not asked certain questions, brought people together, asked them to collaborate, or showed them film footage of themselves and filmed their reactions to it. (Loizos, 1993: 46-47)

For Loizos such a method constitutes a ‘radical epistemology’ for documentary filmmaking (Loizos, 1993: 46). In arriving at these approaches to documentary cinema, Rouch was influenced by the filmmaking philosophies of Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov (Feld, 2003: 12). From Flaherty, Rouch drew his emphasis on collaboration and the model for the kind of participatory, shared cinema found in a film like *Moi, un noir*. Vertov on the other hand, provided Rouch with a theoretical model that led him in an altogether more radical direction. Vertov’s concept of the *kino-eye* and *kino-pravda* (cinema-truth) led Rouch to his own notion of *cinéma vérité*. Like Rouch, Vertov was interested in capturing life as it was lived. He rejected the theatricality of much contemporary cinema and instead urged filmmakers to ‘plunge the cinema into the stimulating

depths of real life' (Stoller, 1992: 102). Crucially though, Vertov stressed that the reality captured by film was not reality *per-se*, but a kind of cine-reality. That is to say, it represented a 'construction of the real prompted by the camera' (Stoller, 1992: 102). In the same way, the term *cinéma vérité* distinguishes Rouch's practice from any 'naive empiricist idea that a camera records "the" truth as it unfolds in front of its eye' (Loizos, 1993: 56). Rouch wrote that Vertov's term 'designates not "pure truth" but the particular truth of the recorded images and sounds—a filmic truth, *ciné-vérité*' (Rouch, 2003b: 98). Though of course, as Loizos reminds us, in spite of this scepticism about the possibility of the camera's ability to reveal an objective or unqualified 'truth', the phrase still nudges us 'in the direction of thinking that something actual and real-world is to be revealed by means of the camera' (Loizos, 1993: 56).<sup>64</sup>

## 2.1. Ethno-Fiction, Or: The Film Became the Mirror

After *Les maîtres fous* (1955)—which represented a move away from the conventional documentation approach of his earlier films into something more surreal, more theatrical, and with a clear narrative structure—Rouch began experimenting with overtly dramatic forms in the late 1950s. With *Moi, un noir* and *Jaguar*, Rouch arrived at a style of filmmaking that a number of commentators have labelled *ethno-fiction* (Stoller, 1992; Sjöberg, 2008). As the term suggests, these films combine fictional or dramatised elements with insights drawn from ethnographic research. They are neither 'straight' documentaries, nor pure melodrama drawn entirely from the imagination of the filmmaker. These are films that tell stories, but stories that are based on 'laboriously researched and carefully analysed ethnography' (Stoller, 1992: 143). Stoller contends that with this approach Rouch threw a 'monkey wrench' into the distinctions theorists have made between 'fiction and nonfiction, participation and observation, knowledge and sentiment' (Stoller, 1992: 143).

In making both *Moi, un noir* and *Jaguar*, Rouch worked closely with his subjects to create films that were, in part, a collaboration. For *Jaguar*, Rouch filmed Damouré Zika, who would become a long-term collaborator, and two friends. They play the 'Jaguars' of the title—young men trekking from

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<sup>64</sup> This is perhaps why Rouch himself eventually dropped his use of the term *cinéma vérité*: 'fearing that it was tainted by the pretension of an absolutist notion of truth' (Feld, 2003: 14). Further adding to the confusion around the terms associated with the cluster of observational filmmaking practices discussed in this chapter, Rouch adopted instead the term *cinéma-direct*.

upper Niger to Accra in Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast) in search of adventure and economic prosperity. Rouch had written extensively about this pattern of migration before beginning work on *Jaguar* and had been searching for a satisfactory way to represent it cinematically (Heider, 2006: 33). Several years after shooting the footage, which was recorded without sound, Rouch screened the rushes for his actors and the three of them improvised dialogue for the film based on what they remembered thinking about and saying. The result was a dynamic, spontaneous and good-humoured film that was informed by Rouch's anthropological understanding of the subject as much as the personal experiences and perspectives of his collaborators.

Similarly, in *Moi, un noir* Rouch asked the man who would play the film's lead, Oumarou Ganda, to 'project his own life as a migrant harbour labourer in Abidjan and express his dreams and aspirations through filmed improvisations' (Sjöberg, 2008: 230). As a result, Ganda, who went on to become a celebrated filmmaker in his own right, invests the character with elements of his own personality, and the film's narrative follows the contours of his personal history.<sup>65</sup> The decision to let the subjects speak for themselves was one of the key innovations of Rouch's ethnographic cinema. Rather than an impersonal, objective narrator, both *Moi, un noir* and *Jaguar* allow the films' central protagonists to be heard. Crucially then, the voices in these films represent subjective, situated, partial viewpoints. They are not omniscient voice of god like narrators. As Loizos notes, 'we hear these things in their own words and these words speak not only of who they are and how they live, but who they would like to be and how they would like to live' (Loizos, 1993: 50).

*Moi, un noir* follows a group of Africans living in Treichville, an Ivory Coast slum, with Ganda portraying a character of his own invention called 'Edward G. Robinson'. Like *Jaguar*, the film was shot without sound. Again Rouch showed his lead a rough cut and had him improvise a voice-over narration, responding to the actions on screen. The result is a kind of 'psychodrama', in which fantasies and imaginary worlds exist alongside social and cultural realities. In the opening sequence Rouch tells the audience in a voice-over that for 'Robinson' the film 'became the mirror in which he

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<sup>65</sup> Rouch described meeting Ganda when he was working as a labourer, and talked about the relationship between Ganda's own life and the film's story: 'I was doing a survey on the migrant people from the north of West Africa who were going to the south, to the Ivory Coast and Ghana to try and find a job. I met [Ganda] working as a docker in the harbour. He was very poor, a veteran of the Indo-China war and he was a kind of romantic rebel who was against everything. At the same time he was full of art and we made *Moi, un noir* because of his own strange story. He was, in fact, in love with a girl who was a prostitute on the harbour and he had a group of friends, one of whom was a boxing champion - they were a kind of family who tried to reconstruct their own village life in a big town' (Rouch quoted in Danino and Mazière, 2003: 131).

discovered himself'. For Rouch this method was in part about using film to do something that conventional research methods could not. As Sjöberg notes, 'the improvisations were thought to express aspects of culture that might be significant for the ethnographic research [...] and difficult to show in any other way' (Sjöberg, 2008: 229). Rouch used this technique to capture what Stoller calls 'the texture of an event' and the 'ethos of lived experience' (Stoller, 1992: 143). 'Fiction', he said, 'is the only way to penetrate reality' (Rouch quoted in Feld, 2003: 6). Rouch also believed that dreams and fantasies were as much a part of people's existence as any other aspect of their daily lives. And as Loizos remarks, 'since people have fantasies and dreams, why not include these in a film which is trying to get more deeply and intimately into their lives?' (Loizos, 1993: 58). Of course, given that 'dreams and fantasies are for a realist epistemology not events of the same uncomplicated and reliable order as making a canoe' (Loizos, 1993: 46) this represented a radical break with earlier examples of ethnographic film made within a scientific/empirical-realist paradigm.<sup>66</sup> *Jaguar* and *Moi, un noir* both decisively draw attention to the limits of what it is possible to represent within a paradigm which sees the camera as an objective recording device.

Another film from the same period, *La pyramide humaine* (1961), extended and developed this method of improvised ethnographic fiction. Rouch's film explores race relations in West Africa amongst a group of young students at a high school in the Ivory Coast city of Abidjan through a process of improvisation and dramatisation. The students act out their responses to the arrival of a new white female colleague, and the drama focuses on the effect her presence has on the rest of the students. Loizos argues that it would have been 'extremely difficult' at the time to shoot a documentary on race relations in a high school in Abidjan 'because the existing political and social climate would have encouraged both whites and blacks to put forward only the most conventional "official views"' (Loizos, 1993: 54). In other words, official censorship, along with implicit self-censorship, may have prevented a truly accurate portrayal of racial tensions in a documentary made along more conventional lines. So by allowing the characters the freedom that playing a role gave to them, they were able to articulate points of view that might not have come to the surface. Rouch uses the process of play acting and dramatisation to reveal a reality which would otherwise have remained hidden. Interestingly, *Pyramide* features a number of individuals who also appear in

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<sup>66</sup> As David MacDougall notes, Rouch's characteristically witty response to charges that works like *Jaguar* and *Moi, un noir* were insufficiently scientific was to brand his films 'science-fiction' (MacDougall, 1998: 74).

*Chronique d'un été*. In this film their appearance also prompts a debate about race relations (as well as a discussion of the political situation that was developing at the time in the Congo and elsewhere). Like the films explored in this section, *Chronique d'un été* was an experiment in 'how one films what is subjectively real about and for people and their cultural situation' (Feld, 2003: 7). Furthermore, a kind of shared, participatory filmmaking process is also an integral part of *Chronique*—though as I will demonstrate, it has a slightly different inflection in this film.

## 2.2. "The Camera Prompts Her To Search For Herself"

Made in collaboration with the sociologist Edgar Morin, *Chronique d'un été* is one of Rouch's most widely seen films. It was also the first that he would make outside of the West African context in which he had been working since the mid-1950s. For the first time Rouch turned his camera on what Loizos calls a 'small clan of his own tribe' (Loizos, 1993: 56). Filmed over the course of a summer in Paris and St. Tropez, the film is a kaleidoscopic documentary portrait of contemporary French society. The film's participants include French and African students, factory workers, immigrants, clerical workers and social activists.<sup>67</sup> Through the prism of the lives of this group of young people living and working in the French capital in 1960, *Chronique* presents us with what Grimshaw calls a 'profoundly unsettling vision of modern society' (Grimshaw, 2001: 112). The film presents itself as a new experiment in 'cinéma vérité'. The term, employed by Rouch in voice-over during the film's opening sequence, suggests that what we are about to see is not *the* truth but *a* truth. Specifically, a truth prompted by the camera's presence. There is an implication that this is somehow a more 'profound' truth than that which is revealed through simply recording the surface appearance of things in a detached manner.<sup>68</sup> *Chronique* contains less emphasis on overt dramatisation and fantasy than *Moi, un noir* and *Jaguar*.<sup>69</sup> But a similar probing impulse, a desire to reveal and uncover, motivates the way Rouch uses the camera in this film. Using a style of observation filming that made 'no pretence of using omniscient invisible cameras' (Heider, 2006:

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<sup>67</sup> In spite of the apparent universality implied by the film's title, this was hardly 'a randomly selected slice of Parisian life' (Loizos, 1993: 59). In fact, Rouch would later refer to the group of people involved in the film as part of 'le petit monde d'Edgar Morin' because they were all largely friends or associates of his collaborator (Yakir and Rouch, 1978: 8).

<sup>68</sup> Grimshaw argues that Rouch was a 'modern-day visionary, a seer' whose 'anthropological cinema involves moments of revelation' (Grimshaw, 2001: 91).

<sup>69</sup> This more sober tone was partly a result of the film being a collaboration between Rouch and the more restrained Edgar Morin. Morin apparently rejected Rouch's idea that they film a fantasy sequence in St. Tropez (Loizos, 1993: 58)

31), *Chronique* is perhaps the ultimate expression of the Rouchian notion of ‘provocation’ filmmaking.

The idea of the camera, and the filmmaking process more broadly, as a kind of catalyst underpins the entire film. Several scenes in particular are emblematic of Rouch and Morin’s strategy in this regard. In the penultimate scene for instance, the film’s participants offer their responses to a screening of an early version of the film we the audience have just seen. In a kind of cinematic *mise-en-abyme* we see *Chronique*’s characters sitting together in a small screening room in the basement of a Parisian cinema, while Rouch and Morin ask them what they thought of the film. One participant, 20-year-old student Régis, describes how he felt about two scenes which are amongst the most memorable, and shocking, in the finished film. In the first, Marilou, who has recently arrived in France from Italy, describes her poor living conditions, her struggles with depression and thoughts of suicide. In the second, Marceline, a Jewish woman who was deported to Birkenau concentration camp during the war, walks alone across the *Place de la Concorde*. As she slowly makes her way across the strangely empty square a hidden microphone records an improvised spoken monologue in which she recalls the moment she was deported, and her experiences in the camp. In each of their scenes both women speak with an extraordinary and discomfiting candour about their lives, sharing intimate details of their personal histories. During the post-screening discussion there is considerable disagreement amongst the film’s participants about these sequences. For some, they are indecent. The women reveal too much about themselves they say. Others doubt the authenticity of the emotions revealed, branding Marilou’s performance as ‘phoney’. It is the young student Régis though, who articulates an idea that is at the core of Rouch and Morin’s epistemological strategy in *Chronique*. In both scenes, Régis suggests, the camera seems to prompt each woman ‘to search for herself.’

The film revolves around this notion of revelation, and self-revelation in particular. Its structure follows a process of gradual revelation too, moving from a macro perspective and a line of questioning that remains relatively superficially, to more intimate perspectives and more probing, personal conversations and questions. *Chronique* opens with a series of shots of Paris early in the morning. We see an industrial cityscape in silhouette while a factory siren wails in the distance. In one shot the Eiffel tower is visible, but only just—this picture postcard image of Paris is confined to

the far corner of the frame. People pour out of a Metro station onto the street on their way to work. The film's opening recalls the city symphonies of Ruttmann and Vertov. But this impersonal, big picture focus on an urban environment immediately gives way to a more intimate approach, one that centres primarily around voice and conversation rather than images, rhythm and movement. Voice, as Grimshaw suggests, is a core element of the film's form and its substantive content (Grimshaw, 2001: 114). It is structured around different kinds of verbal exchanges, from *vox-populi* interviews on the streets of Paris to the intimate one on one interviews with Marilou, and from the deeply personal monologue spoken by Marceline to group conversations at the dinner table, and the post-screening discussion mentioned above. Each of these moments of verbal exchange probes and investigates, attempting to understand or reveal what lies beneath surface appearances.

The film's first sequence after this city symphony segment firmly establishes voice and conversation as the film's focus and central device. It also establishes the self-reflexive quality that is another of the film's key characteristics. We see Rouch and Morin, smoking and casually sitting around a coffee table in an apartment. They are prepping Marceline, the holocaust survivor, for the project she is about to embark upon with them. They discuss the shape of the film, their expectations, ideas and doubts. Then they tell her that all they want her to do is to talk, and to answer their questions. They let her know that if she does not like anything that appears in the film, she will be able to remove it. They then proceed to ask her what she does with her day. She tells them that she conducts surveys, and as Marceline's voice continues over the image track, we cut to shots of her roaming the streets of Paris with a microphone. We see her ask the various people that she meets: 'Are you happy?'. The camera films these interactions from a distance in a detached style that has echoes of the 'natural history' approach found in a Mead-Bateson film like *Bathing Babies in Three Cultures*. The lack of engagement embodied in the camera's distance from the people filmed is mirrored by the responses Marceline receives, which are largely superficial. From these initial superficial conversations though, the film's exchanges become more substantial, until we arrive at those moments of extreme self-revelation featuring Marceline and Marilou discussed above. In contrast with the camera style in the vox pop scene, in these sequences the camera works in conjunction with the audio track to generate meaning. In these scenes the camera shows us Marilou's shaking hands as she bears her soul in front of Morin. Without the camera we would also not see Marceline in a covered market as she continues her walk through Paris. In one shot she is



dwarfed by the roof around her, her figure tiny, childlike, and receding into the distance as the camera tracks away from her.



Fig. 14. Marceline in the covered market.

Source: Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronique d'un été* (1961)

What sort of knowledge does *Chronique* provide then? On one level, the film appears motivated by a desire to inform its audience about contemporary Parisian society. Rouch and Morin begin by asking their participants, how do you live? What do you do with your day? And we do indeed get to know more about the way people live, how they experience work, leisure, society, friends, and romantic relationships. But ultimately the film is not motivated by the principle of filming and organising material with the aim of telling us what is already known to be true. Instead, it is about prompting, through a process of cinematic interrogation, a knowledge of what we do not yet know. This process has a kind of double quality. The participants of the film, and the filmmakers, come to know more about themselves through their conversations with each other and, ultimately, through seeing themselves on screen. For the audience too the film involves a gradual process of revelation, we come to know more about the world these people inhabit through watching and listening to them over the course of the film, and in the process we also perhaps come to know more about

ourselves too. *Chronique* then, suggests a different, more interactive, relationship between audience and film. Audiences are expected to actively search for meaning, rather than being told what to think. For David MacDougall, this was the principal innovation of Rouch's cinema (MacDougall, 1998: 67). As I will demonstrate in the following section, this is a quality that is also at the core of MacDougall's work too. Ultimately, *Chronique d'un été* offers no straightforward answers to the questions it poses. Instead it presents a collection of different perspectives and positions, suggesting that knowledge is always contingent, fragmented and subjective. So in place of the confidence in the camera as an instrument of record that produces a kind of objective, holistic record of reality which can later be analysed and understood, *Chronique* evinces a recognition that anything the camera shows is *always* partial (in both senses of the word).

### 3. DAVID AND JUDITH MACDOUGALL: KNOWING THROUGH FILM

David and Judith MacDougall's approach to cinema was more subtle than the provocation approach Rouch adopted for *Chronique d'un été*, but it presented a similar challenge to many of the conventions of both documentary and ethnographic film. Of the two films explored in this section, the first, *To Live With Herds*, is credited to David MacDougall as director, but the production was carried out in partnership with Judith, who worked as sound recordist while David operated the camera. *Doon School Chronicles* meanwhile, was authored solely by David MacDougall. Between these works the pair collaborated on a number of films which are jointly credited to them both as co-producers/directors, and the intellectual and practical path they have pursued as filmmakers was, from the beginning, forged in partnership with one another. Along with Jean Rouch's strategy of prompting the viewer to actively search for meaning within a film, David MacDougall was also impressed with the way in which Rouch's works imbricate the viewer within the social and geographical space of the film (MacDougall, 1998: 67). The films explored in this section exhibit both of these characteristics. Crucially, these characteristics work in concert with one another in the MacDougalls' cinema.

As Grimshaw and Ravetz suggest, 'in breaking with the norms of the expository film that reported on or reconstructed experience [the MacDougalls] were attempting to render peoples' lives more fully - not in the sense of more accurately or completely but *existentially*' (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 82, emphasis in original). In both *To Live With Herds* and David MacDougall's *Doon School*

*Chronicles*, this fuller rendering of people's lives is combined with a deep underlying analytical structure. These films are simultaneously concerned with rendering both the exterior and interior lives of their subjects—including those aspects of a person's 'inner life' that may be left unspoken, but are nonetheless revealed through body language, gestures, movements and glances—and creating a space for what Grimshaw calls 'the exercise of critical reason' (Grimshaw, 2001: 123). As Grimshaw notes, when watching a film like *To Live With Herds*, 'audiences are not expected to surrender their rationality, their cognitive faculties' (Grimshaw, 2001: 123). In an article tracing the intellectual history of the observational movement that developed around Colin Young and his students on the Ethnographic Film Program at UCLA in the 1960s, MacDougall expounded on the relationship he hoped to cultivate in his films between himself as filmmaker, the film's subjects, the film's audience, and the production and transmission of knowledge: 'the audience and the film subjects had to be drawn more fully into the filmmaking process as confidants and participants. We should be more involved in a common quest for knowledge and the filmmaker less of a magician pulling rabbits out of hats' (MacDougall, 2001: 87). For MacDougall this was partly an ethical and moral imperative, it was a way of 'creating cross-checks on knowledge, a way of creating a triangulation that was for the first time more equitable' (MacDougall, 2001: 87).

One of the key influences on the kind of observational cinema pursued by David and Judith MacDougall was the work of the Italian neorealist filmmakers. David MacDougall described the importance of this work to his own practice and his words are instructive for understanding the epistemological strategies pursued within his own cinema. 'The images of the fiction film were largely anecdotal', MacDougall writes,

They were the pieces of evidence from which one deduced a story. The audience was told little. It was presented with a series of contiguous events. It learned by observing [...] With their emphasis upon the economic and social environment [Neo-Realist films] seemed like mirror-images of the films we hoped could be made from real events in the ongoing lives of traditional peoples. (MacDougall, 1975/2003: 118-119)

To MacDougall and others working in this vein, these fiction films seemed to be more successful at conveying the emotional texture of people's lives than the dominant forms of documentary up to that point. They also seemed to be more effective at engaging the audience in actively searching for meaning and significance in the events and actions they saw on screen. In the neorealist films in

particular, observational filmmakers saw a focus on the small scale, on details, on the minutiae of everyday human life. They also saw the ability of film to express ideas through gesture and cinematic techniques, without words. For instance, there is a famous scene in Vittorio de Sica's *Umberto D* (1952) which illustrates this phenomenon effectively. In one long and entirely wordless scene, famously praised by André Bazin (1971/2005), a young maid in the boarding house in which the main character lives makes herself a cup of coffee. We see her go through every motion, including several attempts at lighting the stove with a match. We see her pouring out the water into the coffee pot, and boiling the water—actions that seem to last as long in the film as they do in reality. In addition to this durational verisimilitude, there is a striking naturalism to her actions as well. For instance, as she fills the water she also takes a drink for herself from the tap. At another point she closes the door with her foot, slinking further down into the chair she is sitting in. These actions seem tremendously human, and they reveal to us more about her character than innumerable lines of dialogue could. It is this building up of little details, and the retaining of those elements that would typically exist in the ellipsis of other films because they were not expedient for the narrative of the film, that characterises both neorealist cinema and observational cinema.

The moment from this scene in *Umberto D* that seems the most pertinent to a discussion of observational cinema though, is the one in which, as the maid stands at the stove waiting for the water to boil, she plaintively looks down at her stomach, resting a hand on it. She then looks up and stares into the distance as the camera zooms in towards her face. In that instant we know that she is pregnant. A slight, young figure, in that moment the maid seems to go from youthful and relatively carefree to suddenly feeling the weight of adulthood. This transformation is entirely conveyed through gestures, camera movement and soundtrack. This is a way of knowing that the observational filmmakers would borrow from heavily. Such an emphasis on patient, sensitive and empathic observation, and on showing rather than telling constituted a deliberate break from the expository and didactic styles that dominated non-fiction filmmaking at the time. In this way, observational cinema consciously differentiated itself from a certain kind of film essay, and other forms of didactic, discursive documentary and ethnographic film. Crucially, these filmmakers were still engaged in the process of generating meaning, but in a fundamentally cinematic, rather than a textual manner. As Grimshaw and Ravetz note, in *To Live With Herds*, which I will discuss in the following section, it is through

careful, patient camera work, mirrored by the fine grained detail of the sound track, [that] the filmmaker assembles a case based upon the meticulous amassing of small observations that comprised a series of propositions about the nature of the reality perceived. (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 83)

As a form of filmmaking that adheres closely to the textures and rhythms of lived experience, observational cinema is in tune with many of the recent concerns of the contemporary discipline of anthropology. As I noted in the Introduction, recent anthropological discourse has stressed the importance of a scholarship that draws on our full sensory experience of the world. Since the Malinowskian revolution,<sup>70</sup> the anthropological project has had at its heart the ‘sensory and experiential immersion in another way of life’ (Carta, 2015: 8), but it is only relatively recently that the kind of knowledge that arises from this kind of sensory engagement with the world is beginning to be seen as a form of knowledge that is as valid as knowledge that can be articulated in propositional prose. Observational cinema is therefore a significant part of a new and emerging non-textual, or experimental, anthropology. This is an anthropology that is primarily concerned with producing a ‘thick’ description of the material and experiential context in which ethnographic research is conducted (Carta, 2015; Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009). David MacDougall, particularly with later works like *Doon School Chronicles*, has been instrumental in promoting the central role that the cinema can play in such a project. MacDougall’s films do not ‘correspond to established disciplinary forms typically expressed through writing’ (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 110). He advocates a different conception of visual anthropology, one where visual media are used in a way that takes full advantage of what these media can achieve. Instead of attempting to replicate written anthropology using cameras, he suggests that anthropologists should take advantage of the ‘distinctive expressive structures of visual media rather than those derived from expository prose’ (MacDougall, 2006: 271). Images are more than words, they are of a different order of experience and thought process to words. They convey something fundamentally distinct that cannot be

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<sup>70</sup> The British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski is often credited with establishing a shift within the discipline towards direct, first hand observation—in contrast to the methods of so-called ‘armchair anthropologists’ who would typically rely on second hand reports from missionaries, traders, and colonial functionaries in order to form their opinions and develop their theories (Henley, 2013). Henley’s description of Malinowski’s method is illuminating, and worth repeating in full here: ‘According to the origin myth, it was [...] Malinowski, based then in Britain but stranded in Melanesia by World War I, who first developed a method based on what came to be known as “participant observation”. This involved total immersion in the daily life of the subjects over a prolonged period, learning their language and studying that life from the inside. It depended not just on listening to what the subjects said, but also on closely observing the non-verbal and the performative aspects of their culture as well. It entailed making connections between different spheres of life: what have ideas about the family got to do with ideas about spirits, what have body postures and table manners got to do with ideas about gender, how do rules of inheritance impact on modes of subsistence?’ (Henley, 2013: 309).

converted into language. The strictures of ‘plain style’ cannot do justice to the complexity of real lived experience. As MacDougall notes, ‘Written language tends towards a schematisation of knowledge’ (MacDougall, 2006: 46). For MacDougall then, films are able to ‘recover a dimension of human experience often lost in texts’ (MacDougall, 2006: 58).

### 3.1. *To Live With Herds*

The MacDougalls’ 1972 film, *To Live With Herds: A Dry Season Among the Jie*, was an important early work of observational cinema. The film had a major impact on a whole generation of filmmakers who saw, in its innovative form and structure, a new way of articulating anthropological knowledge through cinema. One of its principal innovations, as Loizos notes, was ‘allowing the speaking subject a far more prominent role in the total construction than had usually been the case’ (Loizos, 1993: 91). Of course, as we have seen, several years before the MacDougalls work Jean Rouch had also given the speaking subject a prominent role in his ethno-fictions. But *To Live With Herds* did this without opting for the improvisational method found in *Moi, Un Noir* and *La Pyramide humaine*, or the more extreme ‘provocation’ method of *Chronique* (Loizos, 1993: 91). The film is also notable for the way in which it develops its principal thematic and substantive concerns primarily without recourse to the kind of expository techniques found in the maximum transparency approach of Griersonian documentary. So although *To Live With Herds* appears on the surface to simply present ‘live as lived’ it nevertheless remains, as Grimshaw and Ravetz suggest, ‘a profoundly analytical piece’ (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 84). Crucially though, the film presents its argument cinematically, its observational techniques serving ‘as a basis for intellectual inquiry pursued [largely] by means of non-textual forms’ (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 84). It is these two aspects of the film that I want to explore here, as well as the film’s relationship to one of the ‘poetic’ Griersonian documentaries explored in Chapter 2, Basil Wright’s *Song of Ceylon* (1934).

In the film’s memorable opening sequence we find ourselves, with little in the way of context beyond a brief title informing us of the time of day and our geographical location, in the centre of a Jie homestead. The film simply places ‘the spectator there, among people and cattle, immersed in the bustle of everyday activity’ (Grimshaw, 2001: 126). Significantly, the words spoken by the people we see in this opening sequence, as throughout the rest of the film, are subtitled. At the time *To Live With Herds* was released it was unusual for indigenous dialogue within ethnographic films

to be subtitled rather than overdubbed. This stylistic decision has the immediate effect of allowing the viewer to perceive the quality and texture of individual voices—it returns some of the individuality, specificity and subjectivity to the film’s protagonists. They are no longer abstract, voiceless, and objectified cultural types, but much closer to rounded, flesh and blood human beings. In this first scene, a small group of young men and women, surrounded by cattle, drain some blood from the neck of one of their cows.



Fig. 15. The bustle of everyday activity.

Source: David MacDougall’s *To Live With Herds* (1972)

In close-up we see the hands of one of the men skilfully preparing the implement with which he pierces the animal’s skin. The group laugh and talk informally as they go about their task, while occasional looks towards the camera acknowledge the presence of the filmmakers. In this brief scene, which is presented without commentary, we are introduced to the world of the Jie. As Loizos notes, the casualness with which the action unfolds gives the film ‘a flavour of “ordinary life normally lived”’ (Loizos, 1993: 95). But this casualness and apparent spontaneity belies the extent to which *To Live With Herds* is very carefully structured. With this modest opening sequence, the film establishes one of the core intellectual propositions of the film: the centrality of cattle to the lives of

the film's subjects. Crucially though, this proposition is not presented to us in the form of an expository voice-over, but rather, through listening to their conversation, observing the group's surroundings, and noting the familiarity and casual ease with which they handle the animal.

*To Live With Herds* does feature a voice-over commentary, but it is used sparingly and in a manner that acknowledges the presence and subjectivity of the filmmakers. The first time we hear David MacDougall's voice on the soundtrack is immediately after this initial pre-title sequence. MacDougall briefly explains to the viewer how he asked one of the film's principal protagonists, a man named Logoth, to describe the extent of Jie territory. We then see an extended sequence in which Logoth, in medium shot and framed by a vast landscape, explains in his own words the country in which he lives, and the Jie's relationship to surrounding tribal groups. Loizos argues that this simple device—an invitation to speak—immediately made a 'whole tradition of the film-maker speaking for the native informant [...] look both old-fashioned, and unnecessarily patronising' (Loizos, 1993: 95). MacDougall's commentary also inserts the filmmaker within the world he is representing—it positions him as a subjective, situated participant rather than as a detached, omniscient observer. In addition to MacDougall's occasional voice-over, there is also another significant use of verbal/textual material created by the filmmakers themselves: title cards which divide the film into thematic sections and provide additional contextual information which guides the viewer's interpretation of the scenes that follow. For instance, in the first section, entitled 'The Balance', we see an initial title card which is then followed by a passage of text split across four separate titles. This text tells us that to the Jie, cattle are 'the source of all happiness, providing security and order in a harsh environment', it then goes on to note that their existence depends on a careful balance between the large herds of animals they tend to and the amount of water and grass available, before noting that each year the Jie must move their cattle away from the homestead to temporary camps, leaving behind women, children and a few men.





Fig. 16. Title cards as chapter headings.

Source: David MacDougall's *To Live With Herds* (1972)

The film is split into five distinct sections and each section is preceded in the same way, by a title card and a short passage of text which comments on the material we will see in the section itself. These titles function something like chapter headings in a book, serving to ‘put conceptual space between sequences’ and ‘orient the audience to the thematic shape of the material to come’ (Loizos, 1993: 93). This structure was borrowed from Basil Wright’s 1934 film, *Song of Ceylon* (which I discussed in Chapter 2). As Grimshaw and Ravetz note, like *Song of Ceylon*, *To Live With Herds* explores its thematic and substantive questions—in this case about modernisation, nationhood, and pastoralism—through this series of distinct parts, which are organised in a ‘symphonic framework’ (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 84). The audience’s understanding of Jie life emerges through these different sections, which we can think of as a series of variations on a theme. So while the film is organised according to a deliberate internal logic, and the filmmakers wish to advance a particular interpretation of the material they present, it is an interpretation and an argument which emerges gradually, and through a combination of a more open, suggestive, use of verbal exposition, and a kind of patient, cumulative observation of the lives being documented. David MacDougall’s *Doon*

*School Chronicles*, made several years later, extends this process of cinematic intellectual inquiry further.

### 3.2. *Doon School Chronicles*

David MacDougall's *Doon School Chronicles* (2000) is the first in a cycle of five films that the filmmaker made about a prestigious all boys boarding school in northern India. It is at once an immersive documentary in the observational mould—one that places the viewer, with little in the way of explicit, discursive commentary, inside this distinctively Indian post-colonial institution—and a deeply analytical work that suggests the rich interpretative possibilities afforded by the expressive structures of audiovisual media. As MacDougall himself has suggested, the film is a kind of hybrid work that tends in two directions simultaneously: 'toward analysis and abstraction' on the one hand and 'toward a more experiential grasp of student's lives' on the other (MacDougall, 2006: 125). These impulses are not mutually exclusive. In *Doon School Chronicles* the evocation of experiential qualities and an analytical, interpretative framework are imbricated in complex and mutually reinforcing ways. On first viewing of the film though, it is the experiential impulse that stands out. What strikes one immediately about the film is the extent to which the material, physical, sensuous aspects of life within the school are emphasised. In fact, these qualities are foregrounded to the extent that Dai Vaughan, in a review of the film for the journal *Visual Anthropology*, notes the reticence with which he originally approached the task of providing a discursive analysis of a film so seemingly 'innocent of symbolic extravagance or structural complexities' and that at first glance appears instead to be concerned with presenting 'a simulacrum of lived experience for our perusal' (Vaughan, 2005: 458). As he goes on to note though, the film soon reveals itself to not only be rich in experiential detail, but also to contain a dense underlying analytical structure. This duality is clear from the film's opening sequence.

*Doon School Chronicles* opens with a shot of neat rows of white shirts drying on the grass. Two women shake off and lay out various other shirts of different colours, including the distinctive blue and grey checked pattern of the boy's 'PT', or physical training, uniform. We also see clotheslines with bright, royal blue shorts and white vests hanging on them. The film then cuts to a storage room

indoors and we see a man placing the freshly laundered shirts into neat stacks on rows of metal shelves.



Fig. 17. The fabric of school life.

Source: David MacDougall's *Doon School Chronicles* (2000)

An extreme close-up of the collars of two shirts laid on top of each other reveals that each has a little red number stitched into its collar. We will learn later that each boy has a unique number assigned to them. These are used to identify their clothing and for other administrative tasks in the school.<sup>71</sup> The shirts are clean but well worn—a frayed piece of cotton dangles off the collar of one. This sequence immediately signals the film's interest in the material aspects of school life, as well as beginning to suggest the means by which the boy's lives are ordered within the institution, and the way in which their experiences are circumscribed by their material environment. As Grimshaw and Ravetz note, this sequence immediately alerts us to what they call a 'developed aesthetic at work at the Doon School' which is 'material and concrete [and impinges] directly on the bodies that move through its institutional spaces' (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 88). Grimshaw and Ravetz contend

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<sup>71</sup> For instance, in one scene the school's headmaster ends an assembly by calling a group of students to a meeting and identifying each individual using only their assigned number, reeling each one off in rapid-fire succession.

that this interest in the ‘material and sensory landscape’ of the school represents a reversal of the traditional balance of emphasis between foreground and background:

In *Doon School Chronicles*, MacDougall brings what is often overlooked as merely the setting for cultural practice to the forefront of attention. Thus the landscape—understood as terrain, architecture, objects, shapes, textures, colours, movement, choreography, and so on—comes to be reconfigured as an active agent in, rather than a passive backdrop to, the forging of subjectivity [...] Within the pre-title sequence [...] we are made aware of the camera’s interest in visual patterning as much as in human subjects. Aural communication is not just talk but involves a diffuse texture of sounds that expands to include bells, birdsong, footfalls, the hum of human voices, and the echoes of institutional corridors. (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 88)

For MacDougall, this shift in focus stems from a desire to explore the relationship between these aspects of lived experience, and social behaviour. It is in this way that the Doon School films constitute a distinctively cinematic exploration and analysis of what MacDougall calls ‘social aesthetics’ (MacDougall, 2006: 94-119). This notion can be thought of as the way that ‘landscape (understood as sensory, emotional, and material) shapes and is shaped by human subjectivity’ (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 100). For MacDougall the institution of the boarding school represents a particularly potent example of the extent to which this material, sensory, emotional landscape can influence behaviour, events and decisions within a particular community (MacDougall, 2006: 96). The Doon School’s particular ‘social aesthetic’ consists of a mixture of different elements that form a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. As MacDougall notes, these are ‘not so much a list of ingredients as a complex, whose interrelations as a totality (as in gastronomy) are as important as their individual effects’ (MacDougall, 2006: 98). These various elements include:

the design of the buildings and grounds, the use of clothing and colors, the rules of dormitory life, the organisation of students’ time, particular styles of speech and gesture, and the many rituals of everyday life that accompany such activities as eating, school gatherings, and sport (itself already a highly ritualised activity). (MacDougall, 2006: 98)

The film uses a range of different techniques to explore this landscape and to generate meaning—from scenes in which we simply observe different aspects of the boy’s lives in the school, to textual quotations and still images of different objects, clothes, plates, and the boy’s faces and bodies. Occasionally the boys will also talk directly to MacDougall, asking him if he wants to share some of the biscuits they are eating or inquiring about the type of lens on his camera. Occasionally

MacDougall's voice can be heard from behind the camera, responding to a question from one of the boys or speaking to the school's head, but for the most part his presence is felt rather than seen or heard. He remains an observer, though crucially, not one whose presence is elided entirely.

Like *To Live With Herds*, *Doon School Chronicles* is split into a number of distinct sections. There are 10 parts or chapters, each punctuated by an on-screen title that features a quotation. These titles draw on a range of sources with some relation to the school, from distinguished former pupils and the school's newspaper, to the school's first headmaster, A.E. Foot. As in *To Live With Herds* these titles provide a suggestive conceptual frame through which to view the material that follows. Likewise, their function is not to provide a definitive, 'closed' reading of what will follow—instead they prompt the viewer to make connections and to engage with the material actively. This meaning is highly structured and preordained by the filmmaker, but the process of finding meaning nevertheless remains an active one for the viewer. For instance, the very first title functions as a framing device around which the substantive and thematic content of the entire film rests. It is a quote from Foot that likens the school's boys to a pack of playing cards: each card is unique, but features an identical pattern on the back. In the same way, the boys wear the same uniform but each have distinctive personalities. This subtly begins to draw attention to one of the film's primary thematic concerns—the interplay between what MacDougall calls 'social aesthetics' and the development of individual subjectivity.

*Doon School Chronicles* is a rich, sensuous work. The film foregrounds, to an unusual degree, the material and physical aspects of the school. In one scene in the school's canteen we see the metal plates the children eat off, and the soundtrack emphasises the clattering noises they make, which echo through the room. We see that the plates are utilitarian, uniform, and hard. They are unyielding, though with the occasional dent—testifying to their history. As noted above, throughout the film sequences are also occasionally interrupted by a static image which focuses closely on these material objects—whether it is a test tube or the back of a boy's shirt. The film's sensory approach though, remains fundamentally about generating meaning. It remains to a certain extent cognitive. The emphasis on the sensory qualities of the plates for instance, opens up space for the audience to reflect on the toughness and resilience that the school wishes to instil in its students through its regime of rigorous education and physical activity. MacDougall wishes us to draw

conclusions from this material that, although grounded in sensory experience, are nonetheless intellectual/conceptual. By contrast although the films by Stan Brakhage and Robert Gardner that I analyse in the following chapter also generate and suggest certain meanings, I argue that they were primarily concerned with conveying sensory, experiential qualities. As we shall see, Stan Brakhage in particular was explicit in his desire to utilise cinematic techniques that would ‘short-circuit’ our language based cognitive processes altogether, creating a purely sensory/visual cinematic experience. In my analyses of *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* in the final chapter of this thesis I suggest that these two films draw on the sensuous/cognitive approach of a film like *Doon School Chronicles*, as well as the more abstract and fundamentally non-verbal approach of Brakhage and Gardner’s work. It is this combination that I argue is integral to the way in which *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* convey a kind of ‘embodied’ knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

The works explored in this chapter represent important developments in documentary and ethnographic film. Each one contributed to a shift in how filmmakers might conceive of the role of the camera in their work, and a shift in how they might conceive of the relationship between film and knowledge production and transmission. Through practice and theory, both Jean Rouch and David and Judith MacDougall called into question the idea of the filmmaker as a passive observer, and the camera as an objective recording device. They also questioned the emphasis on discursive, didactic and expository techniques found in many of the films discussed in Part 1. However, their work remains fundamentally realist in its representational strategies. Furthermore, these filmmakers were committed, on an ethical basis, to maintaining a strong bond between the representations articulated in their films and the reality of the worlds of their subjects as understood by the subjects themselves. Even in Rouch’s case, although his films involved elements of fantasy, performance, fictionalisation and dramatisation, these elements were mobilised, in part, with the express purpose of enabling the subjects to tell their own story as they understood it. The filmmakers explored in the next chapter did not feel constrained by this moral and ethical imperative. They were more interested in crafting their own, deeply personal, vision out of the worlds they explored and documented. Significantly, they both also, to varying degrees, repudiated

a realist aesthetic, and articulated an approach to documentary that married the form with avant-garde aesthetics. In doing so they suggested ways of knowing that went beyond language entirely.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## KNOWING BEYOND LANGUAGE: ROBERT GARDNER AND STAN BRAKHAGE

Imagine [...] an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure in perception.

- Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision* (1963)

The film which best achieves the 'experience' type learning effect must be left in the hands of creative artists.

- Robert Gardner, Letter to Laurence Marshall (quoted in MacDonald, 2013a: 66)

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In this chapter I explore the work of two filmmakers who pursued new ways of thinking about and using the moving image: Robert Gardner and Stan Brakhage. In discussing their work I continue my exploration of filmmakers who pushed at the boundaries of documentary and ethnographic film. Both Gardner and Brakhage were animated by a desire to fully explore and exploit the creative and expressive possibilities of cinema. Both filmmakers also attempted to use cinema as a means of moving beyond language as a way of engaging with the world. There was a cinema that was less discursive, less immediately legible, and more sensuous, phenomenal and evocative. Like the filmmakers discussed in the previous chapter, their work suggested different ways of knowing. But unlike the films by Rouch and the MacDougalls discussed in Chapter 3, in which language still plays an important role in communicating meaning, the films under consideration here suggest an engagement with a form of knowledge that is constitutively and fundamentally non-verbal. In this chapter I focus principally on Gardner and Brakhage's use of different cinematic techniques, and the way in which their films' formal strategies articulate non-verbal ways of knowing. I argue that their sense of themselves as artists, and their concomitant aesthetic experimentation—in terms of their pursuit of new and different formal strategies—was inseparable from their pursuit of ways of knowing beyond language.



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## 1. IN PURSUIT OF NEW WAYS OF KNOWING

In his book *Metaphors on Vision* (1963), experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage enjoins the reader to imagine ‘an eye unrulred by manmade laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure in perception’. As Paul Arthur (1995) notes, Brakhage was, from the beginning, averse to the way in which language prevents us from ‘directly’ seeing an image. He suggests that for Brakhage the problem was that we ‘automatically “translate” the referents in photographic images into their symbolic signs’ (Arthur, 1995: 71). That is to say, we see, for instance, an image of a baby and reflexively think ‘baby’. Arthur contends that the formal techniques Brakhage mobilises in his work were motivated by a desire to short-circuit or retard this reflexive operation. For instance, in utilising techniques such as extreme close-ups, soft focus, underexposure, or rapid panning, Brakhage was attempting to create an encounter with the image that was more immediate. He wanted the viewer to perceive an image as pure colour, shape, movement or texture. In doing so, Brakhage hoped we might ‘suspend our desire to label, or even misrecognise the object in front of us, and by so doing come to a fuller appreciation of qualities normally “unseen”’ (Arthur, 1995: 71).

In this way, Brakhage posits a way of knowing that bypasses language. Emphasising the role that a kind of pre-linguistic optical perception plays in the production of knowledge, he contends that there may be a ‘pursuit of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optical mind and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word’ (Brakhage, 1963). The parallels with Robert Gardner’s cinema here are striking. Through his own experiments with film, Gardner also pursued ways of knowing beyond language. Gardner first articulated his ideas about film in this regard early on in his career. Drawing heavily on John Dewey’s ideas about ‘experiential learning’ (Dewey, 1938), Gardner, in a letter written in 1953, describes the power of film to impart a kind of knowledge that is grounded in direct multi-sensory experience to the viewer: ‘Through very complicated physio-psychic processes involving principles of identification, association and learning, the net effect possible with film is to

*impart a credible experience to a spectator*' (Gardner quoted in MacDonald, 2013a: 65, emphasis added). Gardner defines 'experience' as the 'acquiring of knowledge by the use of one's own perceptions of sense and judgement' (Gardner quoted in MacDonald, 2013a: 65).

In the same letter Gardner expands on this notion by drawing a distinction between two different kinds of learning/knowledge. One, he says, is the 'result of rote memorisation which has a minimal participation of perceptual organs' while the other 'involves multiple senses and promotes experimental participation within the learning process' (Gardner quoted in MacDonald, 2013a: 66). Gardner saw film as uniquely capable of engaging the spectator in this kind of 'experiential learning' because it can provide 'a close approximation to otherwise unavailable field experiences' (Gardner quoted in MacDonald, 2013a: 66). Significantly, he believed that it was the 'creative artist' who was best placed to produce a film which achieved what he called the "“experience” type learning effect' (Gardner quoted in MacDonald, 2013a: 66). Likewise, the form of knowledge that Brakhage articulates is also envisioned as belonging to the domain of 'film-as-art' (Magrini, 2013: 427). James Magrini describes it as a

legitimate form of perceptual emotional knowledge that is gleaned from works of art, and while it can be poetised—expressed through metaphor and symbol—it defies language in the sense that it differs in both form and content from empirical, axiomatic, and what we might term “propositional knowledge”. (Magrini, 2013: 427)

Alongside their shared explorations of the role that sensory perception plays in the production and communication of a non-propositional knowledge, and the potential of film to convey this kind of knowledge, the two filmmakers also shared a sense of themselves as creative artists. Furthermore, for both filmmakers, as Anna Grimshaw has noted of Gardner's work, their commitment to art, understood as aesthetic experimentation, was inseparable from their epistemological enquiries (Grimshaw, 2007: 122).

### 1.1. An Artistic Sensibility

Gardner—although he briefly studied anthropology at the University of Washington and Harvard University, and sometimes worked within what Peter Loizos calls 'conventionally ethnographic

terms of reference' (Loizos, 1993: 140)—always saw himself first and foremost as a film artist and a storyteller rather than a social scientist (MacDonald, 2013a: 70). Similarly, one of the most common critical interpretations of Stan Brakhage's work, and one that was also notably cultivated by the filmmaker himself, positions him within a tradition of the 'visionary' artist.<sup>72</sup> As Juan Carlos Kase notes, most critics have argued that Brakhage's fundamental contribution was his 'singular focus on the expressive power of the artist's imagination' (Kase, 2012: 3).<sup>73</sup> This is an interpretation in which the filmmaker/artist is seen as someone who is able to see what lies beneath the surface of things and who uses his skills (in this tradition it is typically the *male* artist) in his creative medium to bring a new world into being. Crucially, it is the artist's personal, subjective vision, and not necessarily the real world itself that is given primacy within such a framework.<sup>74</sup> Although Gardner and Brakhage worked predominantly in ostensibly distinct fields—ethnographic film and an avant-garde cinema tradition—they both shared this conception of themselves as 'visionary' artists. For both filmmakers, this self-identity had similar implications for the way they thought about the role of the filmmaker, and for the kinds of cinematic techniques that they utilised.

For instance, although Gardner remained fascinated throughout his life by the detail, diversity, beauty and ingenuity of all manner of human activities, he was generally less interested in the 'truth' of specifics, than in producing creative works that revealed what he believed was a greater, more universal 'truth' from those specifics. He was interested in the general rather than the particular, in the universal rather than the specific. As such, his films about other cultures typically transposed his own reading onto the cultural practices depicted, and often these interpretations had more to do with his own vision of life than with the lives of those he filmed. Gardner's film *Dead Birds* (1963), for instance, is not just about a particular cultural group—the Dani people of the New Guinea highlands—but it is also, perhaps primarily, a film about the universal theme of mankind's awareness of our own mortality. With *Dead Birds*, Gardner signalled that his intentions were more closely aligned with the filmmaker as 'visionary' than the filmmaker as social scientist or ostensibly

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<sup>72</sup> P. Adams Sitney's groundbreaking study of American avant-garde cinema, *Visionary Film* (Sitney, 1974/2002), was instrumental in promoting this particular way of thinking about Brakhage's work.

<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Brakhage's wife Marilyn has written that for Brakhage film became 'that potential magic, that closest of all possible equivalents of human thought process, through which *one's own uniqueness of being* and our shared humanity could be expressed' (Brakhage, 2010: 7, emphasis added).

<sup>74</sup> As we shall see, this was true even in the 1970s when Brakhage was working within a more realist representational frame than that which had characterised his work up to that point. At the start of that decade Brakhage released a trilogy of films known as the Pittsburgh Documents, the formal strategies of which were influenced by the same current of observational approaches explored in Chapter 3.

‘objective’ documentarist. In line with this sense of themselves as artists, both Gardner and Brakhage also exhibited an iconoclastic, experimental spirit, and bristled at what they saw as excessive restrictions on film language. They were both profoundly impatient with the restricted range of conventionally accepted cinematic techniques. In Gardner’s case this meant an impatience with the rigid formal strictures of an ethnographic cinema that was often judged against criteria formed within a written discipline. In Brakhage’s case this meant an impatience with the limited set of cinematic techniques used in conventional narrative cinema. In the following section I explore the impact that Gardner’s artistic sensibility had on his work, and the critical response to it, in more detail.

## 2. ROBERT GARDNER: ARTIST OR ETHNOGRAPHER?

Over a long and productive career Robert Gardner (1925–2014) produced a body of work that has inspired, and continues to inspire, vigorous debate and discussion. Throughout his career Gardner travelled to locations outside of the Western world to film the lives and activities of people from places and cultures other than his own. His most widely seen anthropological films—the four ‘large ones’ as Charles Warren (Warren, 2007: 18) describes them—are *Dead Birds*, *Rivers of Sand* (1974), *Deep Hearts* (1981), and *Forest of Bliss* (1986). *Dead Birds* was shot in New Guinea, *Rivers of Sand* and *Deep Hearts* were both shot in Africa (Ethiopia and the Republic of Niger respectively) and *Forest of Bliss* was filmed in Benares, India. Gardner’s work broaches a number of issues of interest to visual anthropologists and documentary scholars. These include the authenticity, or otherwise, of cinematic representations of real-world phenomena (and questions related to the manipulation and creative shaping of reality); the relationship of visual anthropology to written forms of anthropological inquiry, and the use of the audiovisual medium of film to convey or evoke sensory aspects of lived experience beyond what we see and hear.

The issue that consistently frames discussions of Gardner’s work though—both critical and appreciative—is its nature as both ‘art’ and ‘science’. Gardner was a filmmaker whose work is often framed as sitting at the intersection between art and anthropology. Arthur Kleinman for instance, has described Gardner as ‘an anthropological filmmaker who [...] balanced on a tightrope between the sensibility of the artist and the discipline of the ethnographer’ (Gardner, 2006). Likewise, the Sensory Ethnography Lab filmmakers Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor write that in

Gardner's work 'science and art coalesce with an uncommon intensity' (Barbash and Taylor, 2007: 1).<sup>75</sup> An artistic sensibility, as loosely defined as such a quality may be, is undoubtedly a significant feature of Gardner's work. It is apparent in the lyrical, poetic voice-overs he wrote for early films like *Dead Birds* and *Rivers of Sand*. It can be felt in the uncommon beauty of the images he captured for a film like *Deep Hearts*, and in the complex and heavily layered soundscapes of *Forest of Bliss*. It is also discernible in the smaller and less widely seen films he made about Western artists, as well as in his activities outside of his primary filmmaking pursuits—such as his extensive writing, and his involvement with the Boston based television programme *Screening Room* (1972-1981).<sup>76</sup>

Gardner's 'large films' all undoubtedly deal with issues of interest to mainstream anthropologists—ritual warfare; gender relations; dance and ritual celebration; and funeral rites respectively—but they present these issues in a manner that is often inconsistent with more conservative approaches within the discipline. *Forest of Bliss* for instance, has no voice-over commentary, and none of the dialogue spoken in the film is translated into English. As I will demonstrate in **section 3.3.**, such a strategy is anathema for those who are concerned with the explicit, discursive explication of cultural phenomena.<sup>77</sup> Recent theoretical developments in anthropology though, have brought Gardner's cinema much closer to the concerns of the mainstream discipline, and the 'artful' nature of Gardner's cinema is indivisible from the way in which it connects with these concerns. Those who have celebrated Gardner's work, including Barbash and Castating-Taylor, have often praised its vivid, sensuous-experiential qualities. Barbash and Castating-Taylor co-edited *The Cinema of Robert Gardner* (2007), a volume of essays dedicated to the filmmaker's work, and they argue in their

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<sup>75</sup> Screenings of Gardner's films frequently stress this aspect of his work too. In November 2011, New York's Film Forum held a week-long retrospective of the filmmaker's work entitled 'Robert Gardner: Artist/Ethnographer.' The programme notes for this retrospective featured a quote from the poet Octavio Paz: '[Gardner's] camera scans with precision and feels with sympathy, the objectivity of an anthropologist and the fraternity of a poet' (Film-Forum, 2011).

<sup>76</sup> Initiated and hosted by Gardner himself, the show *Screening Room* first aired in 1972 and ran for almost ten years on a local television channel in Boston. The show saw Gardner welcome a wide variety of major independent filmmaking figures, running the gamut from individuals involved in ethnographic film and documentary to the avant-garde. In one episode Gardner interviews Stan Brakhage. He would also welcome such luminaries of the independent film world as Jean Rouch, Ricky Leacock, Jonas Mekas, Bruce Baillie, Yvonne Rainer and Michael Snow. The show followed a talk show format and featured screenings of the filmmakers' work, often in full. MacDonald suggests that the experience acted as a kind of informal film school for Gardner, and that this education fed directly into Gardner's most celebrated film, *Forest of Bliss* (MacDonald, 2013a: 89).

<sup>77</sup> Of course, while Gardner was never primarily interested in using film to communicate to the viewer what might be considered 'conventional' ethnographic knowledge about a culture or people—and although his films have been heavily criticised for what some consider to be generalisations, oversights and misrepresentations—it would be disingenuous to suggest that one learns nothing about the cultures in question from watching Gardner's films. As Scott MacDonald writes about *Rivers of Sand*, 'it would be foolish to pretend that we don't learn anything about the Hamar from the way they look and move, from their living spaces, and from the evidence of the cultural practices we do see' (MacDonald, 2013a: 77).

introduction that Gardner's cinema 'conveys the sensation of living presence' like no other (Barbash and Taylor, 2007: 1). This pronounced emphasis on the phenomenological qualities of film, and what Barbash and Castaing-Taylor call 'the sensorial profligacy' of his cinematography, is in many ways in concert with developments in anthropology that foreground the role of embodied sensation in our apprehension of the world (Barbash and Taylor, 2007: 9). Anthropology's recent sensory turn (discussed in my Introduction) has loosened the discipline's emphasis on the presumption that language is paradigmatic of meaning in a way that makes Gardner's cinema profoundly relevant today (Barbash and Taylor, 2007: 9). As Anna Grimshaw argues in her contribution to *The Cinema of Robert Gardner*, Gardner's work can be seen as a model for a new, bolder, more expansive and formally inventive visual anthropology (Grimshaw, 2007). His films suggest a way of doing visual anthropology that chimes closely with the mainstream discipline's recent turn towards 'embodiment' as a means of understanding culture. Gardner's aesthetic experimentation and the affinity that his films have with recent theoretical trends in anthropology are closely related: the remarkable sensory engagement of Gardner's films is achieved principally through his experiments with film style.

## 2.1. A Forest of Critics

Gardner's interest in art and his attention to film's formal properties has meant that his work has often been controversial, particularly in the eyes of more conservative practitioners of ethnographic film. He has consistently challenged the 'timidity of ethnographic cinema' and the 'narrow conservatism of its objectives and methods' in a way that makes his work compelling for some and problematic for others (Grimshaw, 2007: 122). Seen as an innovator and a visionary by some, he has been praised for his beautifully crafted, lyrical films about other cultures (Cooper, 1995; Loizos, 1993; MacDonald, 2013a; Barbash and Taylor, 2007). At the same time, others have criticised him for what they see as his brazen irreverence for the 'proper' way of making ethnographic films (Moore, 1988; Parry, 1988; Ruby, 1991). As well as providing a guiding impulse that undergirds all of Gardner's work then, his artistic sensibility has circumscribed the character of the debate that surrounds his filmic output. His films have been especially troublesome for those who are concerned with maintaining what Loizos calls a 'frontier post which marks out hostile neighbouring states called Art and Science' (Loizos, 1993: 165). For some Gardner's work represents the very worst excesses of a certain kind of anthropological filmmaking—his filmic

representations ‘too subjective of the populations encountered to be scientifically valid’ (Bucci, 2012: 2). These critics see what they feel is a problematic emphasis in Gardner’s films on formal and aesthetic concerns, on personal expression, intuition, and the creative shaping of reality—all of which are at odds with the qualities that they believe should be present in a film made in the service of anthropology.<sup>78</sup> For his part though, Gardner was always relatively transparent about his intentions. As Loizos suggests:

Gardner has never been cautious, and the disciplines he has imposed on himself have not been those of ethnographic description. As anthropologists, once we get this basic point clear, and Gardner has clearly been arguing with himself and the rest of us over such matters for his entire working life, we do not need to excommunicate his films, but can enjoy them for what they are, highly crafted personal visual essays on the enigmas of life, death and the self, in varied cultural settings. (Loizos, 1993: 167)

Loizos argues that Gardner’s work can be seen, in part, as a reaction to the constraints of the kind of positivist scientific approach outlined in Chapter 1. He views Gardner’s filmmaking as reminiscent of a French movement within painting and literature called Symbolism—a movement that the art historian Robert Goldwater suggests can ‘be thought of as part of a philosophical idealism in revolt against a positivist, scientific attitude that affected (or infected) not only painting but literature as well’ (Goldwater quoted in Loizos, 1993: 141). Ultimately then, Loizos sees Gardner not as ‘an insufficiently educated realist’ but as a man ‘who has been consistently unenchanted by realism, and attracted to other modes of representation’ (Loizos, 1993: 141). As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, those filmmakers who subscribed to a scientific framework were continually attempting to account for and alleviate bias and subjectivity in their filmed records. Gardner on the other hand, embraced subjectivity and creative shaping as essential to the medium of cinema. He viewed filmmaking as a fundamentally creative endeavour, and believed that the impulse that drives *all* filmmaking, whether documentary or not, is an expressive and creative one.

In a short essay written in the 1980s entitled ‘The Fiction of Nonfiction Film’ (2010), Gardner emphasised the importance of these qualities over cinema’s ostensible capacity to ‘transcribe’

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<sup>78</sup> Despite the controversy that his work has engendered, and the criticisms that have been levelled against him, Gardner’s significance within the landscape of North American non-fiction filmmaking remains uncontested. Loizos notes that though Gardner’s work does not ‘meet the standard criteria’ to be considered truly ‘ethnographic’ he has ‘no doubt that [Gardner] will be accorded a position at least as important as Flaherty in the history of ethnographic film’ (Loizos, 1993: 140). Even Jay Ruby, who has been Gardner’s most vocal critic, allows that he ‘deserves recognition as a founding father of U.S. ethnographic film’ (Ruby, 2000: 96).

reality.<sup>79</sup> With documentary, Gardner posits, the filmmaker is simply shaping and moulding reality to his own vision, rather than conjuring up material based on his imagination with which to then shape and craft a film (as in the fiction film). ‘Film is another way of telling stories’ he writes:

It is a species in the same genus of endeavour as painting, musical composition, photography, or any other mode of expression. As filmmakers, we take up cameras and sound recorders instead of brushes or word processors, and we set about making something that has shape, content, and meaning. The operative word is "make," whether what is at issue is called documentary or narrative, whether it deals with actuality or invention. All filmmaking consists in shaping something in such a way and with such materials and devices that it becomes an object, an object that is always an invention: another item of culture with form and content. (Gardner, 2010: 249)

In the same essay Gardner laments the tendency to ‘think of documentary as a sub-species of film, with different goals, means, and aesthetic principles’ to the narrative film (Gardner, 2010: 249). Notably, although Gardner would produce one film that adhered to the ‘styleless style’ of the ‘direct cinema’ tradition briefly explored in the previous chapter of this thesis, the orthodoxy of this movement was largely anathema to him.<sup>80</sup> He argued that to judge the documentary against impossible standards of objectivity is not only ‘wrong headed’ but ‘crippling to the very enterprise itself’ (Gardner, 2010: 249). Instead he believed that when used sensitively, film is capable of much more than creating a simple record or document of reality. ‘Transcribing actuality is one thing’, he writes, ‘transforming *it* is another, and much closer to the higher promises of film as language’ (Gardner, 2010: 249). In other words, Gardner felt that when film was used with the intention not just of recording reality, but *creating* and shaping something new out of that reality, it was being used in a way that was more properly suited to its purpose and its unique abilities as an artistic medium.<sup>81</sup>

Gardner’s first major film, *Dead Birds*, illustrates this perspective in a way that is instructive. The film is considered a canonical work of ethnographic cinema. But like many of Gardner’s

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<sup>79</sup> The essay, first published in 1986, was written at a time when Gardner was, in his own words, becoming ‘more interested in the blurred boundaries between nonfiction (so called) films and ordinary narrative work’ (Gardner, 2010: 249).

<sup>80</sup> 1965’s *Marathon*, made in collaboration with Joyce Chopra. The film depicts the running of the 1964 Boston marathon.

<sup>81</sup> This perspective has clear echoes of John Grierson’s theory of documentary, and his famous dictum that the form is the ‘creative treatment of actuality’ (Grierson, 1933: 8). Gardner was notably heavily influenced by Griersonian documentary, particularly at the beginning of his career. He recalls having seen *Night Mail* (Basil Wright & Harry Watt, 1936) ‘about 25 times’ (MacDonald, 2013a: 63-64). Likewise, Basil Wright’s *Song of Ceylon* (1934) was another extremely important influence on Gardner’s work (Gardner, 2006)



anthropological films it remains controversial because of a perceived misinterpretation of the culture it represents.<sup>82</sup> *Dead Birds* focuses on an elaborate system of ritual warfare practiced by the Dani. Gardner saw this as the most significant element of Dani culture and the film emphasises this to an extent that other anthropologists have suggested is misleading (Mishler, 1985: 670). For his part, Gardner noted that while it was important to him to describe and reveal the most important aspects of the lives of the Dani people to the Dani themselves, his greater interest lay in what he called the more ‘fundamental issues’ in human life (Gardner, 2007: 114). ‘The Dani were less important to me than those issues’, he writes,

I saw the Dani people, feathered and fluttering men and women, as enjoying the fate of all men and women. They dressed their lives in plumage, but faced as certain death as the rest of us drabber souls. The film attempts to say something about how we all, as humans, meet our animal fate. (Gardner, 2007: 114)

So *Dead Birds* is a film about the way the Dani specifically deal with a universal human experience through the practice of ritual warfare. But as I noted in **section 1.1.**, it is also by extension about *all* of humanity’s attempts to cope with the foreknowledge that we must all at some point die. As Scott MacDonald notes, *Dead Birds* is not ‘simply an informational film’ but a ‘cultural artifact, a work of art, about the idea of confronting death’ (MacDonald, 2013a: 70). Paul Henley has argued that in contrast to the approach typically taken by observational filmmakers—where it is the meaning of the lived experience of the subjects’ world to *themselves* that is of most significance—in Gardner’s work it is the meaning of the lived experience of the subjects’ world to the *filmmaker* that is most significant (Henley, 2007: 53). In the eyes of many social scientists and documentarists, displaying such an apparent disinterest in the ‘indigenous exegesis’ of experience is a deeply problematic position to take. There are certain moral and ethical imperatives that most anthropologists and documentary filmmakers abide by when making films about other people. A commitment to a truthful, faithful or accurate representation of the lives of the subjects filmed, however slippery such concepts might be in practice, is perhaps the most important of these. Gardner’s work however,

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<sup>82</sup> Alongside criticism of its ethnographic accuracy, the film has also been censured for its extensive manipulation of the spatio-temporal continuity of reality through editing techniques common to the fiction film. Craig Mishler for instance, wrote that ‘*Dead Birds* has been coloured by so many subtle fictional pretensions and artistic ornamentations that it has surrendered most of its usefulness as a socially scientific document’ (Mishler, 1985: 669). *Dead Birds* is ‘organised according to a storytelling logic’ (MacDonald, 2013a: 68). Certain scenes are ‘composed [...] of shots taken from a multitude of battles occurring on different days’ and the ‘synthetic construction’ of these scenes displays ‘more regard for the film’s diegesis than the profilmic reality they ostensibly depict’ (Barbash and Taylor, 2007: 3).

often seems to flout these moral imperatives. In relation to this aspect of Gardner's character Henley reiterates the claims of other critics and commentators when he suggests that Gardner's sensibility was much closer to that of the artist than to that of a mainstream social or cultural anthropologist (Henley, 2007: 53).

### 3. THE ARTISTS AND THE ETHNOGRAPHER

Gardner interspersed his production of sweeping, grand films like *Dead Birds* with shorter, more modest films dealing with subject matter much closer to home. As MacDonald notes, Gardner 'braided his fascination with exotic cultural practices that seem unusual but are sometimes surprisingly relevant to the lives of most film audiences with a fascination with artistic sensibility in general' (MacDonald, 2013a: 61). Throughout his life he was interested in the way in which both art and ritual shape our lives and gives our lives meaning. Gardner was fascinated with 'art' in a wide variety of permutations, not just with a particular artistic medium or a specific individual, and his films about 'makers' reflect this broad interest. These films focus on writers, painters, sculptors and other filmmakers. Amongst this body of works there are two films about the American artist Mark Tobey: *Mark Tobey* (1952) and *Mark Tobey Abroad* (1973); a film documenting the erection of a work by the sculptor Alexander Calder: *The Great Sail* (1966); a film about the Hungarian filmmaker Miklós Jancsó: *Dancing With Miklos* (1993); a trio of short films about the Irish-born painter Sean Scully: *Passenger* (1998), *Scully In Malaga* (1998), and *Testigos* (2007); and one about the artist Michael Mazur and his master printer Robert Townsend: *Good To Pull (Bon à Tirer)* (2000).

For Gardner the two, seemingly distinct, worlds that he explored through his films—the lives and activities of people living in distant cultures and the worlds of Western artists—offered similar possibilities for him as someone engaged in what he saw as the fundamentally creative endeavour of producing non-fiction films. Gardner's attitude towards his subjects, and his interest in what was most significant about their world to *him* is again apparent in these films about art and artists. In both situations Gardner was as much interested in the individuals themselves as he was with the themes or issues that their lives or activities would allow him to articulate through his filmmaking practice. Or as Gardner himself put it, in both cases he was interested in 'extracting something meaningful by aiming [his] camera at them' (Barbash, 2007: 113). His films were cinematic

interpretations of his encounters with these worlds. For Gardner this interpretive, creative, inventive impulse was at the heart of all cinema. He believed that the job of non-fiction filmmaking is to both document art making, and in the process also craft a work that is itself, as Gardner would put it, an ‘item of culture with form and content’ (Gardner, 2010: 249).

This duality of purpose is neatly encapsulated in the two films I am going to discuss in the following sections: *Passenger* and *Mark Tobey*. *Passenger* documents the creation of a new painting by Sean Scully.<sup>83</sup> It is therefore ‘about’ the making of a new work of art by Scully. But it is *also* a self-reflexive meditation on the creative process in a more universal sense. *Mark Tobey* also explores similar territory. It is an experimental documentary portrait of the artist, made whilst Tobey was living in Seattle, Washington in 1952. The two films, one made at the beginning of Gardner’s career and the other towards the end, both deal with the creative process. They both feature artists as their subject matter, and they both use notably non-realist or experimental cinematic techniques. They differ in one important respect though, and this difference illustrates an important trajectory that Gardner’s films followed: his steady shift away from the verbal. *Mark Tobey* features heavy use of voice-over. It is full of self-conscious, lyrical and poetic pronouncements about the nature of art. *Passenger* by contrast is entirely wordless. The two films also illustrate a related path that Gardner’s work followed, his increasing interest in the phenomenological qualities of cinema. There are elements of Gardner’s focus on the sensuous and the material in *Mark Tobey*, but these qualities are far more pronounced in *Passenger*, which emphasises the ‘strikingly physical’ nature of Scully’s creative process (Grimshaw, 2007: 6).

Both MacDonald (2013a) and Loizos (1993) see the style and approach the earlier film, *Mark Tobey*, as an important key to understanding Gardner’s subsequent work. MacDonald sees the film as emblematic of a sensibility that would course through the rest of the filmmaker’s output. For him the film is a ‘premonition’ both of Gardner’s subsequent films about artists and the creative process, and also of the ‘focus and approach’ that dominates his films about other cultures (MacDonald, 2013a: 65). For Loizos too, whose analysis of Gardner’s work in *Innovation in Ethnographic Film*

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<sup>83</sup> Sean Scully, who is known for his large scale abstract canvases of patterned blocks of colour, was a close friend of Gardner’s. Scully spoke at a moving memorial tribute to Gardner at the Harvard Film Archive in Cambridge, MA in November 2014, and one of his paintings hangs above the entrance to the dining room of Gardner’s home in Cambridge.

(1993) positions his films within a tradition of non-realist art, *Mark Tobey* is an important film. He argues that Gardner's interest in visual arts and experimental cinema, clearly on display in *Mark Tobey*, is a clue to understanding the 'non-realist' character of his later films (Loizos, 1993: 143). I agree with both MacDonald and Loizos's assessment of the film's significance within the broader trajectory of Gardner's filmography. However, although they both attach considerable significance to the film in terms of the way it anticipates the concerns and approach of the rest of Gardner's output, their descriptions of the film are only very brief, and neither explores the film in much detail. In the following section I analyse *Mark Tobey*, highlighting in particular the way in which the film demonstrates Gardner's interest in exploring a broad range of the creative possibilities of the moving image.

### 3.1. *Mark Tobey*

*Mark Tobey* was Gardner's first film about the painter and only his second as director. Gardner's interest in unconventional cinematic techniques is clear throughout. This is an interest that remained a constant throughout his career, and this experimentation with film form was integral to the development of the epistemological positions that he would develop and articulate in his later work. The film opens in a gallery holding an exhibition of the artist's work. We see a number of Tobey's paintings, and hear a throng of visitors offer their interpretations of his abstract expressionist canvases. The sequence begins with a medium shot of a large red wall, before a silhouette of a man's profile drifts across this sea of colour and past the words 'Mark Tobey' in large white letters. As this unidentified silhouette passes the artist's name, a woman's voice cuts through the low murmur of a crowd of indistinct voices: 'Mr Tobey's really quite famous in New York you know, I understand he's what is known as a museum painter.' The film then cuts to a shot of a painting and the artist himself walks into the frame. Tobey passes in front of the painting, and just as he reaches the mid-point, Gardner inserts a jump cut and the artist disappears from the frame. Through a series of quick cuts we then see several of Tobey's paintings hanging on the gallery walls. Then Tobey himself appears again, this time his back is turned to us, leaned over, peering at and apparently examining one of his paintings. He turns around to face the camera, now wearing a strange pig-like mask. The film then cuts to an extreme close-up of an air-vent—a grid like pattern of metal bars—before the camera tilts shakily upwards to take in another of the artist's paintings.

Throughout this sequence the indistinct crowd of voices continues. At various points, above this mosaic of images and the continuous sound of unintelligible murmuring, we hear a series of different, disembodied voices, each apparently responding to the art and the artist himself.<sup>84</sup> They both compliment and criticise the work. ‘Who is he? He’s so northwest!’ says one. ‘Why does he have to be so derivative?’ says another. The camera then begins to pan around the room taking in all of the artworks on the wall, first panning one way and then the other, gradually picking up speed until it is rapidly whirling around and the image begins to blur.<sup>85</sup> The sound of the crowd of voices speeds up too, becoming—quite literally—a gaggle, as the recognisably human noise of the voices dissolves into the animal sound of ducks or geese quacking loudly. This cacophony of sounds is both a wry commentary on the clamour of voices and opinions in the gallery, and a kind of aural counterpart to the patterns and brush strokes that make up many of the paintings we see—lines, patterns and colours that seem at once random and deliberate, chaotic and ordered. We then see more of Tobey’s paintings in quick succession whilst the voices of several individuals again offer up a commentary on the work. Their assessments are once more accentuated by the film’s soundtrack as certain words and snippets of dialogue ring clear above the ever-present low murmur of indistinct voices. ‘Like tapestries, never to be woven’ one voice pronounces. ‘Like scraped billboards’; says another. ‘Tangled’; ‘Cobwebs’; ‘Spaghetti’; announce three more, apparently responding to the shapes, rhythms and patterns in Tobey’s work. Throughout *Mark Tobey*, Gardner, in voice-over, repeatedly poses the question ‘who are you artist?’, and his film’s images reflect this search for clues as to the workings of the creative mind.

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<sup>84</sup> *Mark Tobey* was made before the invention of handheld and portable synchronous sound recording devices made the simultaneous recording of image and sound in virtually any environment outside of the confines of the studio possible. This technology ushered in the kind of ‘observational’ documentary filmmaking discussed in Chapter 3. Here though, Gardner works with non-synchronous sound, crafting a soundtrack from various different elements that have been recorded separately from the image track in a manner that is closer to the way the different elements of a narrative or fiction film’s soundtrack are typically constructed—in a process conducted by individuals known as ‘foley artists’ the environmental and ambient noises that help to ‘flesh out’ a scene’s cinematic world are recorded separately and then added to the image track during post-production. Even after the development of technology that made it possible though, Gardner rarely used synchronised sound in his films. Instead he preferred to create aural montages pieced together in post-production. His preference for non-sync sound, even after the advent of the technology that made the simultaneous recording of sound and image outside of the confines of the studio possible, is evident throughout his career, but the technique reaches its apotheosis with the soundtrack Gardner produced for *Forest of Bliss*, which is an extraordinary symphony of tolling bells, creaking oars, fragments of untranslated Hindi, religious chants and non-linguistic utterances.

<sup>85</sup> Intercut amongst this shot with the whirling camera movement there is a very brief static shot of a woman holding a baby and wearing a mask. This mask, unlike Tobey’s, is featureless and entirely black. The woman recalls the strange dream-like figure with the mirrored face from Maya Deren’s experimental psychodrama, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). In *Mark Tobey* though, the woman with the baby appears as a kind of inversion of this figure in that famous early work of American avant-garde film. Here, in place of a mirrored mask that returns the gaze of the world with a reflection of it, there is instead a black, unreflective void.

Throughout the film, Gardner bolsters his presentation of Tobey's paintings with visual and aural parallels to the artist's work. Sometimes he underscores the paintings with sound—as in the case of the noise of the geese/ducks—and sometimes he draws attention to visual parallels through juxtaposing imagery of objects and spaces that seem to echo the shapes and patterns in Tobey's paintings. Gardner emphasises the visual patterns found in everyday objects and imagery, the grill of an air vent mentioned above for instance, bundles of wire mesh, or the geometric patterns of overhead tram lines seen later in the film. All seem to find their reflection—as highlighted by Gardner's juxtapositions—in Tobey's paintings. Gardner seems to be suggesting the real-world influences or stimuli that may have prompted Tobey to find these shapes, colours, patterns and rhythms with his paint on his canvases. At the same time, these are images that Gardner himself has produced, they are his own visual counterparts and complements to Tobey's work. *Mark Tobey* then, is a filmic interrogation of what it means to be an artist. It is itself a creative work, concerned with understanding and interpreting the creative process through cinematic means.



Fig. 18. Patterns and shapes.

Source: Robert Gardner's *Mark Tobey* (1952)

Gardner's interest in exploring the creative possibilities afforded by the cinema is immediately apparent in *Mark Tobey*. In this short film he makes use of a range of different cinematic techniques. The film's opening sequence alone is a mixture of non-sync sound, rapid editing, jump cuts, and kinetic, sometimes whirling handheld camerawork. He uses these strategies again throughout the rest of the film but they are particularly prominent here. As a result of these techniques—and particularly as a result of the film's fragmentary style of editing of both image and sound—the film has an impressionistic quality. From the beginning of his career Gardner announced himself as a filmmaker who was less interested in the explanatory and the concrete than the poetic, the abstract and the evocative. The formal strategies Gardner uses in *Mark Tobey* reveal a filmmaker interested in aesthetic experimentation, but they also reveal one who was highly attuned to the phenomenological qualities of cinema. This is a quality that would become more pronounced as his career progressed. Through the montage of sounds, voices and images found in the opening sequence, Gardner creates a kind of cinematic mosaic that impressionistically evokes the environment of the gallery—with its buzz of people, voices and opinions, and the imagery of Tobey's paintings.

Paradoxically, it is precisely because Gardner's audiovisual strategy is non-realist that his work creates such a strong impression of the physical and acoustic space of the exhibition room. In the same way that Stan Brakhage used certain cinematic techniques to compel the viewer to engage with the image as pure texture, movement, shape or colour, Gardner's impressionistic style here has the effect of encouraging a more sensuous engagement with the images and sounds. In *Mark Tobey*, this evocation of the physical and acoustic space of the gallery is notably also complemented by the development of conceptual or thematic qualities within the work. In this opening sequence Gardner's style simultaneously creates this evocative, multi-sensory impression of the gallery's environment, and introduces one of the film's key themes: the way in which an artist (and his or her work) is perceived, judged and interpreted. Again, as in *Dead Birds*, the thematic territory that Gardner develops perhaps has less to do with Tobey himself, than it has to do with the issues Gardner was interested in exploring. He is not so much concerned with providing an informational film about Tobey, as he is interested in providing a kind of cinematic interrogation of what it means to be an artist, and of the way the public responds to an artist's work. This combination of aesthetic experimentation, close attention to the phenomenological qualities of cinema, and the development

of conceptual concerns through cinematic techniques is also present in another of Gardner's films about artists, *Passenger*.

### 3.2. *Passenger*

There is a moment in Gardner's short video work *Passenger*, in which the artist Sean Scully, wearing paint splattered jeans and a white t-shirt, stands with his head resting against the side of a painting in his Barcelona studio. His face is turned down and his eyes are closed. His chest gently rises and falls with his breath whilst R.E.M.'s 'Everybody Hurts' plays in the background. 'Everybody hurts, sometimes...' croons Michael Stipe through the speakers of Scully's tape player. The combination of the artist's body language and the song's plaintive melody and melancholy lyrics threaten to tip the moment towards parody or affectation—a caricature of what Anna Grimshaw calls the 'classic image' of the Western artist: 'The 'isolated white male [...] engaged in an intense creative struggle within the enclosed space of the studio' (Grimshaw, 2007: 129). Scully seems to be engaged in deep thought or contemplation here, perhaps wrestling with precisely this kind of 'creative struggle' or inner turmoil. His bearing—coupled with the song's refrain—suggest that the creation of art is a serious business indeed. That Gardner chose to include this brief, intensely earnest and self-serious moment in his film, in a film that is already notable for its self-seriousness, is characteristic of a filmmaker for whom art, and the making of art mattered deeply. In the hands of another filmmaker it might have been dismissed as cliché, but Gardner keeps it in the final edit. It remains a rather contrived moment, evidence of Gardner's occasional inclination towards what Scott MacDonald calls 'arty', rather than artful, affectations (MacDonald, 2013a: 81). But its inclusion speaks volumes about the filmmaker's profound interest in, and respect for, art and the creative process. Alongside the self-seriousness of this moment though, there is also a ludic and improvisatory quality to the film. It is characterised by a distinct dynamism, and a sense of experimentation and play.

*Passenger* documents the creation of a new painting by Scully. We see and hear the artist at work as he mixes his paint, paces around his studio, inspects and adjusts his canvas, gradually adds layers of colour to the work, listens to music, and even practices karate in front of the finished painting. The film begins with a short introductory section that establishes the physical space of the studio, introducing the world in which the film will unfold. The very first image we see is a brief medium shot of an artist's studio, there is a large square grey canvas with a rectangular hole cut out of its



centre hanging on the wall. This is the canvas that will become the painting 'Passenger'. In front of the canvas is a large armchair. Perhaps Scully sits in this armchair when resting and contemplating his work, but we never see him doing this in the film. Instead, in *Passenger* Scully is almost constantly in movement. On the right-hand side of the canvas are several completed paintings resting against the wall. From this brief medium shot we cut to a long shot of the whole studio. It is spacious and bright, with a bare wooden floor. The framing of the shot draws our eye towards the blank grey canvas that sits in the centre of the frame. In this long shot we also see Scully, standing in front of his workbenches, his hands resting on his hips as he shifts from side to side. A large man, his physical presence within the room is striking, and his movements through the space of the studio are deliberate and measured. Scully paces around his studio, taking in the painting from different angles, and shifting from foot to foot with a masculine and graceful physicality—almost, as Barbash and Taylor suggest, like a dancer (Barbash and Taylor, 2007: 7).<sup>86</sup> Scully's benches are littered with pots, cans, brushes and other painting paraphernalia. As he paces the floor of his studio the film's title appears in a white, simple, utilitarian typeface.

Gardner described his motivation for producing *Passenger* as a desire to see how Scully created a work: 'how he looked for and sometimes found sense with the marks he made on the canvas' (Barbash, 2007: 115). Using the cinematic tools at his disposal, Gardner describes and interrogates Scully's creative process. As he suggests in the same interview, we cannot know what goes on inside the artist's head whilst the painting is being made simply by observing him at work, but we can learn something about the process through seeing and hearing the visual and aural results of his process of painting (Barbash, 2007: 115). In other words, we learn something through observing Scully's process of 'finding sense' in the marks he makes on the canvas. Though crucially, that *something* may not be possible to articulate in words. This epistemological position is reflected in the fact that in *Passenger* we do not hear from Scully verbally. There are no talking head/interview sequences and there is no voice-over commentary in which Scully or a narrator explains what the artist is doing in words. Instead we simply see Scully—his face and his body, his hands, his gestures and his movements—in the moment of creating the painting. Notably, we also hear him. The only sounds in the film are those made by the artist as he works, with the addition of sounds recorded

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<sup>86</sup> As Gardner himself noted, 'More than anything else, *Passenger* is a film about Scully's whole body and how it moves in relation to the canvas' (Barbash, 2007: 114).

post-sync that accentuate these noises: footsteps, banging, paint slopping into buckets, and brush strokes on the canvas. We also hear short excerpts of music from the tapes Scully listens to whilst painting.



Fig. 18. Mixing paint.

Source: Robert Gardner's *Passenger* (1998)

Like *To Live With Herds* and *Song of Ceylon*, *Passenger* is also split into sections. The full title of the film is *Passenger: A Video in Four Movements* and the film consists of four short sections, each announced by an on-screen title including the number of the section and a fragment of a lyric from one of the songs that Scully listens to whilst he paints. The four sections (I - Just A Dreamer, II - Helpless, Helpless, III - The Ocean Is, and IV - Letting Go) are ordered chronologically, with the painting gradually taking shape as the film progresses. The word movements in the film's full title evokes the dynamic, embodied nature of Scully's creative process. The title alludes in part to the artist's literal movements around and in front of the canvas: his pacing up and down, his gesturing, his karate practice, the movement of his brush strokes against the canvas, and the process of mixing paint (at various points Scully slops great wads of paint into large buckets then sloshes in turpentine in order to create the desired texture and thickness). Alongside the physical meaning of the word movement though, the title also evokes the musical sense of the word. Like *Passenger's* four

sections, musical symphonies often contain four distinct movements. This allusion also highlights the importance of sound in the film. Given the relative ‘flatness’ of the video image compared to analogue film, the principal textures within the film are aural rather than visual, and the work has a strong, rhythmic, and musical quality. This rhythmic quality is created through the film’s editing strategy. Like in *Mark Tobey*, Gardner also utilises sharp jump cuts throughout *Passenger*. Here though, the technique is even more prominent, and becomes a central part of the film’s form.

Throughout *Passenger*, Gardner cuts abruptly to different moments captured from the same angle, producing a kind of stuttering time-lapse photography that both illustrates the passing of time and the different stages in the work’s creation, and gives the film this rhythmic, musical quality. The jarring nature of the jump cuts is accentuated by the fact that Gardner retains the sound from the original image track, without smoothing it over or adding transitions. The rhythmic and aleatoric quality that this strategy lends to the images and sounds in *Passenger* produces a kind of cinematic *musique concrète*. As noted above, Gardner also added additional ‘foley’ sound effects—clattering, brushing and slopping sounds that accentuate the physicality of Scully’s work. We hear sounds made at the moment of creation. These noises are a part of the history of the artwork. They are the physical, aural and temporal dimensions that the finished work elides. The way sound and image are cut together in *Passenger* also further underlines the film’s non-verbal emphasis. There are fragments of spoken dialogue that remain in the finished edit, but the fragmentary, jump-cut editing style that Gardner utilises cuts short the sounds of the two men (Scully himself and Gardner from behind the camera) talking in such a way that these sounds become non-linguistic utterances. They remain incomprehensible noises rather than recognisable as language. A similar strategy is found in the last of Gardner’s films I want to discuss in this chapter, *Forest of Bliss*. The Hindi spoken in this film remains intact, but untranslated. It is, for the non-Hindi speaker, sonic texture—a part of the fabric of the world that Gardner’s film attempts to evoke through cinematic means.

### **3.3. *Forest of Bliss***

One of the main reasons Gardner’s critics have found his films so problematic is their distinct lack of verbal explanation and expository information. While earlier works like *Dead Birds* were characterised by a heavy use of poetic voice-over narration, his later works increasingly eschewed

language altogether.<sup>87</sup> By the time he started making *Forest of Bliss*, Gardner had ‘turned his back on words’ almost entirely (Loizos, 1993: 164). His films moved instead towards what Barbash and Taylor call ‘a realm of greater aural and visual plenitude in which language, as in life, plays only a minor role’ (Barbash and Taylor, 2007: 8). The controversy that Gardner’s films have engendered seems to be almost directly proportional to the level of verbal commentary and expository information contained within them. *Forest of Bliss*, as Gardner’s least discursive work, was also his most contentious. The film depicts a single day from sunrise to sunset in Benares, a holy city on the banks of the river Ganges, where many people travel from all across the country in order to die or to bring their dead or dying relatives. Apart from a brief Yeats quotation that appears on the screen at the beginning of the film that acts as a ‘leitmotiv’ or ‘root metaphor’ that anchors the film’s sequences thematically (Loizos, 1993: 161), Gardner’s film has no other on-screen text or voice-over commentary, and none of the dialogue spoken in the film is translated into English. Instead, for the viewer who cannot speak Hindi, the film functions as a purely non-linguistic visual and aural encounter with the world of Benares. The film therefore appears to be uninterested in conveying descriptive or propositional knowledge about the city and the cultural practices it depicts. Instead it presents a cinematic portrait of the city, as refracted through Gardner’s lens, in all its clamour and disorientating beauty. Thick with sounds and images that convey a strong sense of place, *Forest of Bliss* conveys the sensuous aspects of lived experience that resist translation into language.

Shortly after its release the film was the subject of a particularly heated exchange of articles, reviews and commentary in the pages of the newsletter for the *Society for Visual Anthropology* (SVA). Much of this criticism, both positive and negative, centred around the film’s eschewal of discursive exposition. Also at the core of this debate were questions such as: What is the place of ‘aesthetic’ techniques within anthropology? Should an ethnographic film use cinematic techniques such as close-ups, non-sync sound, slow-motion photography, montage, and so on? Does an anthropologist have a duty to limit an audience’s ‘misinterpretations’ of cultural practices by

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<sup>87</sup> The almost continuous presence of voice-over commentary in *Dead Birds* (1963)—which Gardner describes as having been ‘a huge job of writing’ (Barbash, 2007: 101)—gave way eventually to the virtually wordless *Forest of Bliss*. Each successive Gardner film between *Dead Birds* and *Forest of Bliss* made less use of narration. Though *Rivers of Sand* and *Deep Hearts* both feature voice-over, there is greater space between the brief moments of commentary in the latter than in the former, which in turn contains less voice-over than *Dead Birds*. MacDonald attributes this in part to Gardner’s ‘increasing dissatisfaction’ with his own voice-over commentaries, as well as suggesting that it may have in part been due to ‘the increasing prestige of detached observational cinema’ during the period, and its ‘proponents hostility toward the over determinism of narration of any kind’ (MacDonald, 2013a: 81).

circumscribing the meaning of images through didactic, expository techniques such as voice-over and on-screen explanatory text? Is this verbal explanation more essential, and a greater ethical or moral imperative when the practices on display are at risk of seeming unusual, unsanitary, or even repulsive to viewers from a different cultural background? In a particularly scathing review of the film, and the article that initiated this animated debate across two issues of the SVA's newsletter in the late 1980s, Alexander Moore begins by conceding that the film, if taken as a work of art, is 'for pure imagery, for sheer cinematic beauty, an aesthetic masterpiece' (Moore, 1988: 1), before launching into a criticism of the film that takes it to task for not doing what he believes an anthropological film should do.



Fig. 20. A wordless vision.

Source: Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* (1986)

Moore's critique of the film essentially centres on one point, that the film shows but does not tell. For Moore the film is troubling because there are no words to explain to us what we are seeing, there is no explanatory frame placed around the images we see and the sounds we hear. He describes the film as 'deficient because it relies on only one perceptual mode, vision, to convey information [and] there are clear limitations in the information that can be conveyed by visual images' (Moore, 1988: 2). Emphasising his own attitude towards the 'correct' way to impart

knowledge within an ethnographic film, Moore then goes on to list a set of correctives that he believes would fix the film's anthropological missteps: subtitles or overdubbing of foreign language dialogue, and voice-over commentary explaining what is happening. 'There are many techniques available today, not used by Gardner, to extend visual information' Moore argues, but 'lacking any of these devices we are left to figure the film out for ourselves from the images' (Moore, 1988: 2). He continues:

The structure of the film [...] goes far toward showing what life looks like in the holy city. However what is missing are precisely the devices to make the beautiful images fully intelligible, and not horrible images of heathenry being filthy. (Moore, 1988: 2)

For Gardner though, critics like Moore had missed the point. In a letter that appeared in the following issue of the SVA newsletter, Gardner explained that his interest was not to simply mirror and replicate written anthropology in film form (Gardner, 1988). He did not want to use a film's images as mere illustration, supplementary to the spoken/written word.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, throughout his career Gardner was interested in the creative possibilities of cinema, and he was particularly interested in what the medium could do that other representational media could not. Gardner, particularly towards the latter part of his career, wanted to see how film could be used in a way that made use of the specific properties of the medium itself. He was, in his own words, 'a lapsed graduate student trying to invent an anthropology that used film and photography instead of words' (Gardner quoted in Cooper, 1995: 70). In *Forest of Bliss* we must extract our own meaning from the images and sounds we see, and this meaning may not be one that is easily articulated verbally. As Loizos notes, in *Forest of Bliss* 'Gardner wishes us to see what he means',

In this film he may be thought of as resembling a veteran war photographer, who has 'seen it all' and feels he understands everything and nothing. He has 'nothing to say' conceptually, in abstract language, and everything to say in images and sounds [...] Such a humanistic message is regarded with suspicion by social scientists in their professional contexts - the research journal, the disciplinary seminar. There, they want conceptual, formal, systematic, precise and above all *unambiguous* explanations of the world. (Loizos, 1993: 164, emphasis in original)

In lieu of the film's lack of unambiguous *verbal* explanations, *Forest of Bliss* has what many critics have identified as a remarkable sensuous plenitude (Barbash and Taylor, 2007; Bucci, 2012 et al.). In

moving away from language Gardner ‘conjured at a more phenomenal, pre-discursive relationship between spectator and screen and between film and the world’ (Barbash and Taylor, 2007: 8). As Barbash argues, *Forest of Bliss* ‘virtually demands the viewer to respond non-verbally, viscerally’, noting that the film ‘stimulates an interplay of the senses with an uncommon intensity’ (Barbash, 2001: 377). ‘[T]he camera’s eye’, she writes,

seems at once unusually tactile and unusually auditory. More than that, it is an olfactory eye and a haptic ear. We feel and smell the ghats and their pyres, the boats and their oar locks, the bamboo-worker and his bidi, as much as we see and hear them. (Barbash, 2001: 377)

In line with Barbash’s reading of the film, Mauro Bucci (2012) also suggests that Gardner’s film communicates to the viewer something of the sensory experience of being in that particular environment. It conveys the ‘flesh’ of that world, with its vivid colours, its clamour of sounds and voices, and perhaps even, its smells (Bucci, 2012). Such sensory engagement is achieved, Barbash and Taylor argue, principally through Gardner’s striking cinematography, and through his use of the close-up and the corresponding ‘aesthetic of the fragment’ (Barbash and Taylor, 2007: 8). Barbash and Taylor’s understanding of the means through which the film evokes ‘the sensation of living presence’ (Barbash and Taylor, 2007: 1) chimes closely with Laura Marks’ (2000) ideas, which I will explore in more detail in the following chapter, about the strategies through which audiovisual media can convey sensory experiences beyond the visual and the aural. These ideas are central to the analyses of *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* that I advance in the following chapter. The use of the close-up, combined with particular editing strategies, presents environments, people’s bodies and people’s actions in fragments. The fragmentary aesthetic that Barbash and Taylor identify in Gardner’s work is also notably at odds with what they call the ‘prevailing fiction of holism [...] to which anthropology and ethnographic film, despite growing protestations and disclaimers, still typically tends’ (Barbash and Taylor, 2007: 8). As noted in Chapter 1, this ‘fiction of holism’ is encapsulated in Karl Heider’s prescriptions for ethnographic film to capture ‘whole bodies, whole people and whole acts’ (Heider, 1976/2006: 64). A fragmentary aesthetic, one that is less immediately legible, and more evocative and abstract, was a crucial aspect of Stan Brakhage’s cinema too. As I noted in **section 1**, it was a crucial part of his own epistemological inquiries. Like Gardner, Brakhage has also been praised for producing works which ‘explode with sensual beauty’ (Camper, 2010). Brakhage went even further than Gardner in moving away from verbal language

though, renouncing the use of sound altogether in many of his works, believing it was ‘a distraction and impediment to an avowed “adventure in perception”’ (Arthur, 1995: 70).

#### 4. STAN BRAKHAGE: DOCUMENTARIAN OF SUBJECTIVITY

A prolific artist, the American experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage (1933-2003) produced a great deal of work over a career spanning more than 50 years. Between 1952 and 2003, Brakhage made between 350 and 400 films. His extensive filmography is also remarkably diverse, encompassing a wide range of different styles and approaches. This diversity leads Paul Arthur to suggest that Brakhage’s oeuvre represents ‘a territory whose dense folds and outcroppings refuse any unified critical perspective’ (Arthur, 1995: 69). What remains constant throughout this territory though, is that Brakhage was a filmmaker who was manifestly interested in exploring the expressive, creative and artistic potential of the moving image. Brakhage pushed at and stretched the creative possibilities of moving image technology well beyond its conventional use as a representational medium and a narrative form. As Arthur notes, Brakhage was

disgruntled from the start with what he felt were excessive restrictions to the arsenal of conventional film language and investigated as no artist before him the expressive possibilities of hand held camera movement, exposure, superimposition, focus, synthetic editing, and the physical manipulation of the filmstrip. (Arthur, 1995: 70)

The numerous works in his filmography represent a commitment to this experimentation with the latent potential of the moving image—what Arthur describes as a ‘compulsion toward a near totalised exploration of the cinematic apparatus’ (Arthur, 1995: 69). Brakhage’s formal and technical innovation though, was never for its own sake, but

always at the service of engendering in the viewer various states of perceptual experience. To this end he has lent his energies to fashioning dreams and nightmares, fantasies and memories, “closed-eye vision” (what is seen when we press our fingers to our lowered lids), hypnagogic images (the numinous state between waking and sleep), and perhaps most spectacularly, the imagined vision of infants, children, animals, and insects. (Arthur, 1995: 70)

This notion of representing the world as it is subjectively perceived, either by Brakhage himself or as he imagined others to perceive it, is key to understanding the epistemological position embodied in his films. Even when he was using techniques like multiple superimpositions, or scratching and



painting directly on to the filmstrip, Brakhage always insisted on the relationship of his works to the world around him (Nesthus, 2001). As Fred Camper notes, ‘the variety of images and techniques in Brakhage’s films is partly about giving form to his eyesight’ (Camper, 2010). He presents ‘not only what is there but the manner in which it is perceived’ (Arthur, 1995: 72). Brakhage then, as Bill Nichols argues, is able to claim a ‘realist motivation’ to his formal innovations, because the ‘extreme styles’ he utilises are an attempt to address the way ‘we might perceive the world outside the constraints of social convention and routinising experience’ (Nichols, 1991: 171). Or as Brakhage put it, his films are an attempt to see through the vision of an eye that is ‘unruled by manmade laws of perspective [...] unprejudiced by compositional logic [and] which does not respond to the name of everything’ (Brakhage, 1963). In attempting to use film to represent subjective perceptual experiences uncoloured by these conceptual/cognitive/verbal frameworks, Brakhage can, as Camper suggests, be thought of as a ‘documentarian of subjectivity’ (Camper, 2010). Alongside his more abstract works, Brakhage also notably produced a number of films that adhere more closely to the ‘observational’ style of documentary filmmaking known as ‘direct cinema’ discussed briefly in Chapter 3. However, even in these films Brakhage films and edits in such a way so as to convey something of his own subjective experience to the viewer. For instance, with his film *The Wonder Ring* (1955), Brakhage turned his camera on a soon to be demolished elevated subway line in New York City. The short film can be seen as part urban salvage ethnography, documenting as it does an area of 1950s New York that was about to vanish.

The film is composed only of material filmed within the subway environment and uses no sound or post-production effects beyond a rhythmic editing style. In tight close-ups we see the components of this urban environment recast as abstract, sculptural forms, at once both familiar and strange. Brakhage’s camera tilts slowly up over a zigzag pattern of light and shadow cast across an iron staircase. Trains streak past our view in the foreground and the frames of the windows and the human figures inside the cars are recognisable only in silhouette as they flash by the platform. Elsewhere shafts of light pierce stained glass, and in the reflections of windows and mirrors parts of this ageing urban landscape are superimposed upon one another. Brakhage’s images flit between varying degrees of abstract and representational, largely as a result of his creative use of framing. Using this strategy the filmmaker crafts an evocative cinematic representation of a particular place. *The Wonder Ring* is, as Arthur notes, ‘at once a medley of rhythmic shapes and a precise evocation

of a patch of urban landscape at a particular moment' (Arthur, 1995: 72). The film conveys to the viewer a kind of heightened sense of the experience of being within that environment. *The Wonder Ring* succeeds in doing this in part because its representational strategy closely mirrors the selective way in which we perceive an environment as we move through it; our attention flits between details, one moment focusing on the light reflecting off a patch of water on the pavement, next noticing the way the dress worn by the woman ahead of us stirs in the wind before our attention shifts again to the flow of traffic as we prepare to cross the road. *The Wonder Ring* mimics this selective perception, showing us the world as Brakhage sees it. The film selectively focuses on those aspects of the environment that have caught the attention of his (camera) eye as he moves through it. And crucially, it does so without placing the images we see within a frame of conceptual or linguistic understanding.



Fig. 21. The play of light and shadow.

Source: Stan Brakhage's *The Wonder Ring* (1955)

In the early 1970s Brakhage would return again to a similar representational strategy for a trilogy of films known as the Pittsburgh Documents, or the Pittsburgh Trilogy. These films 'expand on the latent documentary sensibility that manifested occasionally in earlier works [...] and bring it to the foreground of his practice' (Kase, 2012: 2). Brakhage, who counted one of the pioneers of the Direct

Cinema movement, Richard Leacock, as a colleague and friend, was intrigued by developments in non-fiction filmmaking beginning to take place in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Nesthus, 2001). Like *The Wonder Ring* and like the majority of Brakhage's output the films are entirely silent. But otherwise, the three films marked a new aesthetic approach for Brakhage and a turn away from the working methods he had cultivated up to that point. With these works, Brakhage 'shifted his approach to film construction away from densely layered, highly montage based work [...] and toward a more immediate recording of a photographic encounter with real world phenomena' (Kase, 2012: 4). This trio of films includes *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971), *Deus Ex* (1971), and *eyes* (1971). Each film depicts a different institution in the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. *The Act of Seeing* is the most widely seen of the three. It is also regularly shown to Sensory Ethnography Lab students (MacDonald, 2012b).<sup>88</sup> The film was shot in a Pittsburgh morgue and features graphic scenes of human autopsies, while *eyes* follows the city's police force as they go about their daily routines, and *Deus Ex* was filmed in a hospital and depicts an instance of open-heart surgery, amongst other invasive procedures.

*The Act of Seeing* was the last of the 'document' films to be made. It represents the culmination of a period of introspection on Brakhage's part—an engagement with questions about the nature of art and documentary that prompted a rethinking of his working methods and his ideas about cinema. In a series of correspondences Brakhage wrote at the time, the filmmaker wrestled with the idea of how to represent reality on film. For Brakhage, who as noted above, always stressed the relationship of his work to the real world, but who was consistently critical of documentary techniques, the central question was how to show reality as directly as possible, without recourse to what he understood as the overly manipulative rhetorical structures of 'traditional' documentary (Nesthus, 2001: 133). In a letter to the filmmaker Hollis Frampton he writes:

I am most concerned in my work at the moment with Document (as distinct, as I can make it, from Documentary – knocking that "airy" off the end giving me the sense I'm escaping that rhetoric and outright propaganda associated with "Old Doc" school of film-making... (Nesthus, 2001: 145)

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<sup>88</sup> In an interview with Scott MacDonald, Ilisa Barbash notes that she 'never studied Stan's work but came to know it when we [Barbash, Brakhage and Castaing-Taylor] were colleagues in Boulder, and as I showed his films in my classes [...] I think Stan's attention to detail, to the frame itself, in fact to parts within the frame, was influential on our thinking about film [...] Each tiny element, each frame, each sound needs to be carefully considered' (MacDonald, 2015: 392).

To this end Brakhage attempted to devise what Kase describes as ‘a fresh breed of non-fiction film, divorced from the ideological framing structures of the documentary as he had come to understand it’ (Kase, 2012: 5). In doing so he overhauled his working methods, simplifying and stripping down his ‘toolbox’ of aesthetic techniques. ‘Some of the obvious manifestations of that direction’ Brakhage writes in a letter to the poet Robert Creeley,

are my selling all sound equipment, giving away chemicals, eschewing lab effects which would be obvious as such and giving up those forms of editing which operate as absolute control over the immediate means of photography [...] I am now up-and-down to tone and rhythm in the editing process. (Nesthus, 2001: 144)

With *eyes* and *Deus Ex*, Brakhage had already experimented with this new style of observational filmmaking, but it was his encounter with the morgue that brought this new approach into sharp focus. In the same letter Brakhage outlines the effect that his visits to the morgue had on his thoughts about how to deal with this subject matter. ‘I am beginning work on a film photographed at The Pittsburgh Morgue’, he writes:

It has come to be called: “The Act of Seeing... with one’s own eyes”: That is the most literal meaning of “autopsy” and is exactly the impulse which moved me to undergo such a terrible series of sessions of photography. [...] At first I kept telling people that I intended to interweave these Morgue images with mountain-ranges, moons, suns, snow, clouds, etc. - The mind leaping to escape in every conceivable symbol...as it had while I was photographing [...] One good look at the footage (once the lab had processed these three thousand-some feet) and I knew it was impossible (for me now anyway) to interrupt THIS parade of the dead with ANYthing whatsoever, any “escape” a blasphemy, even the “escape” of Art as I had come to know it. This gathering of images (rather than editing) had to be straight. (Nesthus, 2001: 144, emphasis in original)

Brakhage wanted to convey the immediacy and the intensity of his experiences at the morgue through cinematic means, and the film is unflinching in its depiction of the dead bodies, the operations of the coroners, and the casual ease with which they go about their work. We see men in white lab coats disembowel, poke, prod, clean, slice and measure several corpses. These are victims of fire, of murder, or suicide perhaps—we can only imagine. Brakhage’s silent film provides no information beyond what we see in the actions on screen. But in the attention paid to the materiality of the bodies in the morgue the film is meticulous. It documents the textures, shapes, and forms of the bodies, as well as the play of colour and light within the morgue, with a vividness that prompts James Magrini to suggest that there is a ‘fusion of worlds’ taking place when we watch a film like

*The Act of Seeing*. ‘Our “lived world” merges and participates in the visceral lived world of the film’, he says, ‘we are [...] present in the morgue with all of its macabre, clinical sublimity’ (Magrini, 2013: 432).



Fig. 22. Texture, colour and flesh. Source: Stan Brakhage’s *The Act of Seeing With One’s Own Eyes* (1971)

Crucially though, although the film’s formal strategies remain less ‘extreme’ than in many of his other works, there remains what Magrini calls ‘a stark and bold obtrusive presence to the camera,

it is a living-camera that shakes, trembles, and darts to and fro with a sense of autonomous conviction in order to transcend the mechanical, the cold technological remove of the machine, and return it to the lived world of the filmmaker, as a physical and emotional extension of the person holding the camera, who views herself and world, through it, and in turn invites the spectator to dwell in this world as if he or she is viewing the world directly through the filmmaker’s third organic eye. (Magrini, 2013: 432)

This sense of the camera as an extension of the filmmaker’s eye/body was directly tied to Brakhage’s filmmaking methodology. For him filming was ‘an intense, unadulterated bodily event, and often the result of hard and physical labour’ (Magrini, 2013: 431). As Magrini notes, Brakhage would often practice filming with an empty camera,

performing repetitive exercises in creative movement that closely resemble the beautiful and strange movements of modern dance, in order for these bodily movements to become for him second-nature, as part of his organic bodily make-up. [It is clear] that for Brakhage filmmaking is as much about the bones and sinew—the blood and sweat—of the artist as it is the capacity and capability to see and visualise in perceptive and imaginative ways. (Magrini, 2013: 431)

This idea resonates strongly with the experience that Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel underwent when filming *Leviathan*, one of the Sensory Ethnography Lab films I will discuss in the next chapter. For both filmmakers making *Leviathan* was a laborious, physically intensive process that took a considerable toll on their health (Hoare, 2013). The way they shot some of their material, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, also produced an aesthetic that as Paravel suggested in an interview, seems ‘to be much more yoked to a subjective, embodied experience of the world that you would have when you’re actually in the world, not when you’re just making a film’ (Jaremko-Greenwold, 2013)

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that Robert Gardner and Stan Brakhage, through their experiments with film form, pursued ways of knowing beyond language. Their work points to the possibility that film can not only engage the viewer cognitively, using sounds and images to generate meanings and suggest interpretative possibilities through verbal and non-verbal means—in the manner that the films explored in the previous chapter do—but that film can also be used to convey fundamentally non-verbal, affective, subjective, embodied experiences. For both filmmakers this conveyance of subjective sensory experiences was partly framed in epistemological terms. As I noted in **section 1.**, for Gardner it was a question of recreating ‘otherwise unavailable field experiences’ in order to engage the viewer in a kind of ‘experiential learning’ (Gardner quoted in MacDonald, 2013a: 66), while Brakhage was pursuing a kind of knowledge ‘foreign to language’ (Brakhage, 1963). The filmmakers associated with the Sensory Ethnography Lab whose work I will discuss in the next chapter have been heavily influenced by the ideas and approaches to filmmaking explored in this chapter. Like Gardner’s work, *Leviathan* and *Sweetgrass* represent a style of ethnographic filmmaking in which the creative possibilities of the medium of cinema are an essential part of the project. *Leviathan* extends the approach of a film like *Forest of Bliss*, marrying it with an aesthetic

that, at times, seems to echo Brakhage's most abstract, expressionistic works. *Leviathan* uses what, following Laura Marks (2000), I describe in the next chapter as 'haptic' audiovisual strategies in order to stimulate our senses beyond vision and hearing. In doing so I argue that the film conveys an 'embodied' knowledge to the viewer.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### HARVARD'S SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHY LAB AND EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE

It was the rigorously exact representation of nature - a complete novelty at that time - which thrilled the public. The ones who were familiar with the sea exclaimed, 'that's it exactly!' and the ones who had never seen the sea felt they were standing on its shore.

- George Méliès (quoted in Cousins and Macdonald, 2006: 10)

But what if film doesn't speak at all? What if film not only constitutes discourse about the world but also (re)presents experience of it? What if film does not say but show? What if a film does not just describe but depict? What, then, if it offers not only "thin descriptions" but also "thick depictions"?

- Lucien Castaing-Taylor, 'Iconophobia' (1996: 86)

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In this chapter I argue that two key works produced under the aegis of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab draw on and extend the developments explored in the previous chapters of this thesis in order to explore new ways of knowing. Like the filmmakers discussed in the previous two chapters, these SEL films reject the plain style/whole bodies aesthetic of a certain strand of ethnographic filmmaking, as well as the expository approach of the Griersonian legacy within documentary. Instead, the films discussed here—*Sweetgrass* (2009) and *Leviathan* (2012)—adopt and extend the observational approach of filmmakers like David MacDougall, and the sensuous aesthetic of Robert Gardner's later work. Drawing on previous scholarship on these two key SEL films, I argue that while *Sweetgrass* utilises a sensuous, but predominantly realist aesthetic, in order to convey a kind of knowledge that is closest to that of a film like *To Live With Herds* (1972), *Leviathan* utilises a more radical, fragmented, abstract aesthetic. I describe this, following Laura



Marks, as a ‘haptic’ audiovisual strategy and I contend that this points to the possibility that the film conveys a kind of purely affective, non-cognitive ‘embodied knowledge’—a knowledge that is situated not in the mind, but in the body.

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## 1. THE SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHY LAB: EXPLORING THE WORLD THROUGH FILM

In a manifesto that articulated his emerging filmmaking philosophy, the pioneering Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov outlined what he considered to be the ‘essence’ of the medium of cinema. ‘The main and essential thing’, he writes, ‘is the sensory exploration of the world through film’ (Vertov, 1923/1984: 14). Vertov was writing in 1923, over eighty years before the filmmakers of Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) took up their cameras and set about producing their own explorations of the world through film, but their work could comfortably be framed in a similar way. Vertov conceived of his exploration of the world primarily in ocular terms. For him the motion picture camera extended the limits and capabilities of the human eye. He famously conceived of the camera, in combination with the editing process, as a *kino-eye* or ‘cine-eye’ (Vertov, 1984). That is to say, a more perfect, and perfectible, *mechanical* eye that is able to reveal more about the world than the human eye alone ever could.<sup>89</sup> Vertov prized the camera’s revelatory power—its ability to show us more of the world, and in new and different ways than our eyes alone would allow. As Dennis Lim suggests, SEL filmmakers are motivated by a similar impulse (Lim, 2012). Theirs is a quest, Lim argues, ‘to find fresh ways of seeing, to push the limits of cinema as a tool for both capturing reality and heightening the senses’ (Lim, 2012). In this way they are continuing what Lim calls a ‘venerable tradition’ (Lim, 2012) within non-fiction filmmaking that includes Vertov, and the work of the filmmakers explored in the previous chapters of this thesis.

SEL filmmakers do not see the camera simply as a tool for exploring the *visible* aspects of reality though. They are concerned, as Scott MacDonald notes, with using audiovisual media ‘as a means

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<sup>89</sup> Assuming the perspective of this ‘cine-eye’ Vertov writes: ‘I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it. Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them [...] free of the limits of time and space, I put together any given points in the universe, no matter where I’ve recorded them. My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you’ (Vertov, 1923/1984: 17-18).

of communicating the broadest range of human experience' (MacDonald, 2013a: 315). This includes all of our sensory experiences. What a particular place looks like and sounds like; but also perhaps how it *feels* to be in a particular environment. The works produced by the hyphenate artist-filmmaker-anthropologists associated with the SEL represent an attempt to use audiovisual media in a way that vividly conveys a sense of lived experience. They offer what Christopher Pavsek calls a cinema of 'sensuous plenitude and perceptual richness, embodied experience, and visceral immediacy' (Pavsek, 2015: 5). Many of the films produced under the aegis of the SEL take one specific locale as their focus: a fishing trawler off the coast of Massachusetts in *Leviathan* (2012); a bustling park in Chengdu, Sichuan Province in *People's Park* (2012); an empty basement in New York City that is transformed before our eyes into a makeshift mosque in *On Broadway* (2011); or the confined space of a cable car transporting pilgrims to and from a sacred Nepalese temple in *Manakamana* (2014). In each of these films close attention is paid to the texture and the physicality of these specific environments. Through the formal strategies—both visual and aural—that these films employ, the particularities of these different worlds are rendered in vivid detail.

Like Robert Gardner's later work, SEL films typically eschew verbal devices such as the expository voice-over, as well as intertitles and other text based framing devices. Also like Gardner, this strategy is part of an attempt to use film within anthropology in way that is attentive to the unique properties of a medium that Lim describes as 'ideally suited to capturing the flux of lived experience' (Lim, 2012). Such an approach positions the SEL squarely within the debate within visual anthropology, discussed in my Introduction, concerning the relative merits of verbal versus non-verbal means of communication. The SEL is the product, and one of the principal champions, of the idea that what cinema can do is 'reveal something different from what gets revealed in even the most intelligent and engaging prose' (MacDonald, 2013a: 315). As MacDonald suggests, while

a written text on a culture or cultural practice can tell us what the writer has come to understand about that group or activity, can even help us imagine what it might be like to be in a certain place and live in a certain way [...] a carefully made film can offer its audience a sensory experience that reflects and reflects on the actual experiences of others (including the filmmakers themselves) as they occurred in a specific place during a specific time. (MacDonald, 2013a: 315)

So rather than *telling* us about these worlds, SEL films *show* us what it is physically like in a certain environment, helping us to see and perhaps feel the world from the subjective perspectives of the

people, and animals, depicted. As Westmoreland and Luvaas suggest, the work of the SEL points to the possibility that film can convey ‘something meaningful—and fundamentally nontextual—about the world around us’ (Westmoreland and Luvaas, 2015: 3). In this chapter I argue that this ‘something meaningful’ could productively be described as embodied knowledge. This is a kind of knowledge that, as Bill Nichols argues, ‘requires different forms and styles of representation from those that have [typically] characterised ethnographic film’ (Nichols, 1994a: 70). I argue that the two films I analyse in this chapter offer precisely such ‘different forms and styles of representation’.

In this chapter I focus on two key SEL works: Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor’s *Sweetgrass* (2009), which first articulated the approach to non-fiction filmmaking that would be developed and promoted within the context of the lab, and Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel’s *Leviathan* (2012), a film that arguably represents the apotheosis of the SEL’s filmmaking philosophy as articulated by the lab’s chief architect, Lucien Castaing-Taylor. *Leviathan*, as Westmoreland and Luvaas suggest, represents a ‘veritable litmus test for the possibilities of sensory ethnography being advanced at Harvard University’ (Westmoreland and Luvaas, 2015: 3). That is to say, a litmus test for how successful SEL filmmakers—in this instance, Castaing-Taylor, Barbash and Paravel—have been in realising their avowed intentions to use audiovisual media to communicate the many multi-sensory aspects of lived experience that resist translation into language.

### 1.1. Theory and Practice

The heart of the SEL’s activity is the training and supporting of producers of culturally inflected audio-visual media, and this is done primarily through a group of courses that teach students the history, theory and practice of ethnographically informed film, video, sound and hypermedia works. The core SEL courses are ‘Sensory Ethnography I’ and ‘Image/Sound/Culture.’ These are taken concurrently and provide students with practice based training in the production of audio and image based works of non-fiction. Other courses that have been offered to students through the SEL include advanced classes on the history and theory of media anthropology, and ‘Exploring Culture Through Film’, an intensive introduction to the history and theory of documentary and ethnographic film in which students explore and compare the ‘different cinematic styles which have been used to depict human existence and the relationships between individuals and the wider

cultural and political contexts of their lives' (Taylor, 2008a). In taking these courses students are steeped in the history, theory and practice of ethnographic film and documentary. They also view a broad range of other work from the annals of cinema, including experimental and avant-garde work. They are therefore exposed to a wide variety of audio-visual works, and crucially, this exposure is not limited solely to the kinds of canonical ethnographic films typically shown to visual anthropology students.

As part of this education, SEL students are also encouraged to engage in a broad inquiry into the creative and epistemological possibilities of the moving image. What can one do with film that one cannot do with other forms of communication such as the written word? Castaing-Taylor's program asks, and in turn prompts viewers to ask, these kinds of questions. This is an intellectual debate that the Castaing-Taylor has been engaged with throughout his career. The filmmaker's 1996 article 'Iconophobia' is a key touchstone in this regard. In it he outlined what he identified as a mistrust or fear of visual images on the part of many anthropologists. Castaing-Taylor's article is a key touchstone from the past 20 years of ethnographic film theory, and the views outlined in it are significant for understanding the approach that he has promoted at the SEL. At Harvard, Castaing-Taylor has developed an institutional context within which to put the philosophy outlined in 'Iconophobia' into practice. It is a space in which a different kind of visual anthropology can be pursued, one motivated by, in Castaing-Taylor's words, 'a desire to question the elaboration of social theory as uncorporeal knowledge unanimated by phenomenological lived experience', what he describes as 'an intent, in other words, to re-embody vision, to sensualise the spectral, to shape the scopic as tactile' (Taylor, 1996: 160).

## 1.2. A Space for Experimentation

The choice of the Sensory Ethnography Lab's name links it to an anthropology of the senses, at the same time as it also brings to mind the scientific tradition within ethnographic filmmaking explored in Chapter 1. A laboratory is of course a place where scientific tests and experiments—objective, verifiable and repeatable—take place, and where there are the tools and equipment needed to conduct such experiments. But the name, as Sniadecki remarks, also suggests experimentation in a much looser, more ludic sense:

I think the term, “sensory ethnography lab,” is very appropriate, because it’s a laboratory with tools and space for seeking out the new, for experimentation and inspiration. Every morning, Lucien comes in with stacks of books, print-outs, news about art exhibitions—and films to show. You have cameras and microphones, equipment, but no one’s telling you that you have to make films this way. As Véréna [Paravel] suggests, it’s all about experimenting. What becomes most important for practically everyone involved is producing something with these tools, and this common emphasis on the creative process makes the experience feel very democratic. (MacDonald, 2012a)

This particular understanding of ‘experimentation’ brings the SEL closer to an avant-garde or experimental tradition in film history, as exemplified in Chapter 4 by the work of Stan Brakhage. Like Brakhage, SEL filmmakers are interested in pursuing new ways of thinking about and using the moving image. Crucially, as with Brakhage this formal experimentation is inseparable from a particular kind of epistemological inquiry. As Sniadecki suggests in an article outlining the philosophy and filmmaking methodology underpinning his film *Chaiqian* (2008), it is precisely through what he calls ‘an engaged interest in the relationship between aesthetics and experience’ that the filmmaker can open up ‘intersubjective, experiential forms of knowledge’ that offer ‘an alternative to the dominant expository and/or narrative modes of ethnographic filmmaking’ (Sniadecki, 2014: 25). Likewise, Anna Grimshaw (2011) argues that aesthetics and knowledge are intimately related in Barbash and Castaing-Taylor’s *Sweetgrass*. The film, she suggests, offers an ‘important model for understanding the ways that the aesthetics of film can be used to [generate] ways of knowing that resist translation but exist in productive tension with other knowledge forms’ (Grimshaw, 2011: 258). Drawing on this work, in this chapter I also explore the centrality of an aesthetic sensibility to *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*. I explore the relationship between the cinematic techniques of these two films and their engagement with different ways of knowing. Before moving on to my analysis of these two films though, I want to first draw attention to the ‘discourse of newness’ that has surrounded the lab’s work. In the following section I highlight some of the ways in which previous scholarship has attempted to temper this narrative, and I outline the ways in which my work is distinct from this previous scholarship.

### 1.3. A Documentary Like No Other?

Beginning with *Sweetgrass*, and Véréna Paravel and J.P. Sniadecki’s *Foreign Parts* (2010), before intensifying with the subsequent releases of *Leviathan* and *Manakamana*, the SEL has received a significant amount of scholarly and popular attention. Features on the SEL have appeared in,

amongst other publications, *The Guardian* (2013), *Sight & Sound* (2013), *Dazed & Confused* (2015) and *The New York Times* (2012). The lab's work has also received significant exposure through programmes at a number of international film festivals—including an extensive programme at the 2013 Viennale entitled 'Wild Ethnography' which featured a selection of shorts, features and sound works produced through the SEL. SEL work has also been exhibited at a number of high profile art galleries, including 'the Centre Pompidou, London's Institute of Contemporary Arts, the Berlin Kunsthalle, Marian Goodman Gallery, MoMA, the Museum of the Moving Image, PS1, Tate Museum, and the Whitechapel Gallery' (SEL, 2016). Within the context of academic film studies this attention has also been conspicuous. In 2015 the University of Sussex organised a symposium dedicated entirely to the work of Lucien Castaing-Taylor, a filmmaker who at the time had just two significant feature length releases to his name (excluding *In and Out of Africa* (1992) and *Made in USA* (1990)—both made in collaboration with Ilisa Barbash, and which are difficult to see outside of anthropology departments—and the gallery installations he has produced using material drawn from *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*. This popular and scholarly attention is largely due to the nature of the work itself, which is undeniably exciting. But it is also thanks in large part to a forward thinking distribution strategy that is distinct from the somewhat hermetic exhibition strategies typically associated with ethnographic film. As Westmoreland and Luvaas remark, *Leviathan* in particular has:

achieved what many visual anthropologists secretly hope will happen to their films; it has extended itself well beyond the parochial boundaries of our subdiscipline, catering to audiences who are not traditionally consumers of ethnography at all, and inspiring awe and soliciting praise from film critics, festival goers, and the larger cinephiliac art world. (Westmoreland and Luvaas, 2015: 2)

SEL filmmakers have deliberately courted attention outside of ethnographic film's primary zones of circulation through theatrical releases in independent cinemas, as well as an engagement with the art world—as epitomised by the repurposing of material produced for feature length films for the gallery context. Castaing-Taylor and Barbash's *Sheep Rushes* (2001-2009) project for instance, repurposed material shot for *Sweetgrass* for exhibition within the gallery. Paravel and Castaing-Taylor also produced several films for exhibition in gallery spaces from material shot for *Leviathan*, including *He Maketh A Path to Shine After Him* (2013) and *The Last Judgement* (2013). As I noted in my Introduction though, much of the critical commentary on SEL work has focused primarily on *Leviathan*, and much of this writing emphasised the 'newness' of the film. Several critics suggested

that the film represents a formally radical and unprecedented new form of documentary filmmaking. Scott MacDonald, though qualifying his statement with the suggestion that ‘of course, there is nothing new under the sun’, nonetheless described the experience of viewing *Leviathan* as ‘entirely new in the annals of modern theatrical cinema’ (MacDonald, 2012b).<sup>90</sup> Meanwhile the documentary filmmaker and critic Robert Greene described the film as a ‘nonfiction game-changer’ (Greene, 2013), while Dennis Lim suggested that the film ‘look[s] and sound[s] like no other documentary in memory’ (Lim, 2012).

However, as Mark Westmoreland and Brent Luvaas remark in their introduction to the special issue of *Visual Anthropology Review* (2015) dedicated to *Leviathan*, SEL work ‘did not spring forth fully formed out of nowhere’ (Westmoreland and Luvaas, 2015: 2).<sup>91</sup> Christopher Pavsek meanwhile, in an article that critiques what he sees as the blind acceptance on the part of some critics of the way in which Castaing-Taylor and Paravel have framed their work, suggests that the ‘newness’ of *Leviathan* ‘depends, in part, on a broader historical forgetting of what cinema has done before’ (Pavsek, 2015: 7).<sup>92</sup> Building on this previous scholarship, this thesis is an attempt to more fully counter the ‘historical forgetting’ that Pavsek and these other critics identified.

In the following section I turn to the first of the two SEL films I explore in detail in this chapter, Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash’s *Sweetgrass*. In this section I draw on both Scott MacDonald and Anna Grimshaw’s commentary on the film in order to explore the way in which aesthetics and epistemological inquiry are intimately related in the film. I contend that *Sweetgrass* extends the observational approach of the films explored in Chapter 3, such as *To Live With Herds*

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<sup>90</sup> From art-history, MacDonald, who has written extensively on both documentary and experimental film, names the 19th-century maritime paintings of Winslow Homer and J.M.W. Turner, and the action paintings of Jackson Pollock and Willem De Kooning. From the history of cinema he singles out Brakhage’s gestural films made in the late 1950s, as well as the most widely seen of Brakhage’s trilogy of ‘document’ films, *The Act of Seeing With One’s Own Eyes* (1971). Other cinematic precedents that MacDonald mentions briefly are Georges Franju’s surrealist poetic documentary on a Parisian slaughterhouse, *Le sang des bêtes* (1949), and the work of Robert Gardner (MacDonald, 2012b).

<sup>91</sup> The publication of this special issue is a testament to just how stimulating, novel, compelling and, in some cases, contentious the film has appeared to many working within the field of visual anthropology (and beyond). Notably, many of the issue’s contributors are individuals who work across a number of different fields. There are articles from anthropologists, filmmakers, art-historians and film studies scholars—with many of the contributors identifying as some combination thereof.

<sup>92</sup> Significantly, Pavsek notes that ‘one should at least register the degree to which a film like *Granton Trawler* [...] not only provides a thematic ancestor to *Leviathan*, but also developed a visual lexicon from which *Leviathan* borrows and which it updates for a hi-def world, as can be seen in its images of the black surface of the sea, the omnipresent gulls, the repetitive tasks of the fisherman drawing on lines and gutting sea creatures, and the mucilaginous close-ups of dead and dying fish’ (Pavsek, 2015: 7).

(1972) and *Doon School Chronicles* (2000). I suggest that it offers a similar ‘way of knowing’ to these earlier works. It provides a vivid, sensuous representation of a particular cultural practice and environment, but in a way that also has a clear underlying analytical structure that suggests certain conceptual interpretations of the material to the viewer. It also utilises a similar aesthetic to these earlier films, one that is rooted in a realist representational strategy. Although, as I will demonstrate, there is a much greater attention to the formal properties of the image within *Sweetgrass* than is often the case with observational cinema. In contrast to *Sweetgrass*, I argue that *Leviathan*, whose aesthetic is at times distinctly *non*-realist, with images and sounds that are often abstract and non-representational, conveys an altogether more radical kind of knowledge. As a result of the filmmaking methodology Castaing-Taylor and Paravel employed during the production of *Leviathan*, there is a much greater emphasis throughout the film on extreme close-ups, under and overexposure, soft focus, and rapid, often disorientating camera movement. Drawing on Laura Marks’ work, I argue that the approach *Leviathan* utilises could be described as a ‘haptic’ audiovisual strategy—one which stimulates our senses beyond vision and hearing. I conclude that the use of such a strategy points to the possibility that the film conveys a fundamentally non-propositional, non-cognitive form of knowledge, a knowledge situated not in the mind, but in the body. As I will demonstrate, there are moments within *Sweetgrass* that anticipate the aesthetic that would be developed within *Leviathan*—but these moments of attention to formal properties such as light, shadow, movement and the overall texture of the image, are pushed to the extreme in the latter film.

## 2. SWEETGRASS

Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor’s *Sweetgrass* (2009) documents a fading way of life in which man and nature exist in close proximity. The film depicts the annual herding of thousands of sheep to pastures in the Absaroka-Beartooth wilderness in Montana for what turned out to be the final time. Shot over a period of several years, as noted above, the film was informed by extensive research into sheep ranching, as well as the filmmakers’ own immersion within that world as practised by the people depicted in the film. The film attempts to create what Scott MacDonald calls an ‘intensified, engaging film experience based on and analogous to what seemed the essential elements of the experience of sheep ranching’ (MacDonald, 2013a: 317). This attempt to provide a kind of mimetic cinematic *experience of an experience* is accomplished through the film’s careful



and considered use of both sound and image. Throughout *Sweetgrass* the filmmakers are attentive to the range of creative possibilities open to them. Crucially though, the film features no voice-over narration, and although it contains several instances of intelligible human verbal communication, these words are not privileged above other kinds of *non-verbal* communication, both human and non-human, or environmental sounds. The film's close attention to the creative possibilities of the medium is inseparable from its epistemological inquiry. As Grimshaw argues, in Barbash and Taylor's project 'the cinematic form is an integral part of the anthropological endeavour' (Grimshaw, 2011: 249). In *Sweetgrass*, 'nothing was left to chance in how the film looks or sounds or moves—all its constituent parts were purposely chosen and crafted as an integral part of the inquiry itself' (Grimshaw, 2011: 252). In this way the film bears a close resemblance to a film like *To Live With Herds*, which has a similar deep underlying structure that guides the viewer towards a particular interpretation of the material.

Though filmed over several years, *Sweetgrass* condenses the material Barbash and Castaing-Taylor produced into a narrative that unfolds over a single composite year, beginning with the shearing of sheep during the winter season and concluding at the end of summer the following year. The film's central, and longest, section depicts the remarkable journey that two of the sheep herders, "hired hands" John Ahern and Pat Connolly, take across the mountains with the sheep, their dogs and their horses. Over the course of three months they steer thousands of sheep across precipitous terrain to the grassy basins in the mountains where they feed during the summer. The film concludes with the sheep finally being brought back down from the mountain, as the sun sets at the end of a long day. In the film's closing moments we see John sitting in the cab of a truck, exhausted but seemingly content, smoking a cigarette and reflecting on how he will spend the coming months while the highway passes by in the window beside him.



Fig. 23. Bringing the sheep back. Source: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash's *Sweetgrass* (2009)

The film's careful attention to film form and aesthetic concerns is apparent, first and foremost, in *Sweetgrass*'s striking imagery. As Grimshaw suggests, *Sweetgrass* declares, 'without shame', that 'how something looks is as important to the filmmakers as what is being looked at' (Grimshaw, 2011: 252). Indeed, almost every shot in the film appears carefully composed. Castaing-Taylor's camera is attentive to the way in which objects, people, animals, and landscapes sit in the frame. This attitude, which we might call an aesthetic impulse, is also apparent in the way the filmmakers have discussed the film. Alongside the extent of their engagement with the history and contemporary significance of the practices they documented, the directors' commentary that accompanies the DVD release of the film also reveals that the filmmakers were considerably interested in aesthetic concerns. Castaing-Taylor for instance, describes one shot as 'exquisitely beautiful'. Both the filmmakers also remark upon how the film draws on, and subverts, the cinematic iconography of the Western, as well as the tradition of the Pastoral in European and North American landscape painting. MacDonald also draws attention to this aspect of the film in his analysis, noting that much of the film's imagery has an affinity with certain traditions of American landscape painting (MacDonald, 2013a: 326). This visual, painterly, way of looking is apparent throughout the whole film, but it is immediately signalled by the film's pre-title sequence.

## 2.1. An Aesthetic Impulse

Before the words ‘Sweetgrass’ appear on the screen we see a number of carefully framed static shots that echo landscape, still life and tableau paintings. The first is an image of the vast expanse of a snow covered and tree lined valley with mountains on either side stretching off into the distance. We then see a rusted-out shell of an old car sitting in a snow drift next to a single tree; then a more modern and functional looking, but clearly well used, caravan; and finally, an image of a great mass of sheep on a snow and tree covered rise in which almost all of the animals have their heads turned towards the camera, seemingly returning the viewer’s gaze. These initial images, as well as echoing the subject matter and composition of certain styles of painting and thus beginning to signal the extent to which the film foregrounds formal/aesthetic concerns, also begin to indicate the way Barbash and Castaing-Taylor articulate, through cinematic means, certain propositions about the practice of sheep ranching within their work. In the first instance, these images underline the centrality of this environment to the agricultural practices we observe. They also draw attention to the landscape’s great beauty, whilst highlighting its vast and unforgiving nature. The rusted out car in particular seems a premonition of the landscape’s harsh or hostile nature, while simultaneously hinting at the film’s exploration of a way of life that is on the wane—and the transience and mutability of cultural practices more broadly. Then finally, the image of the sheep that return our gaze subtly anticipates the way the film draws attention to the intelligence of its ovine subjects.



Fig. 24. The sheep return our gaze. Source: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash’s *Sweetgrass* (2009)

Throughout *Sweetgrass* the filmmakers pay careful attention to the properties of light, shadow, colour and movement in a way that has more in common with traditions of avant-garde filmmaking than documentary or ethnographic film. In one shot a group of sheep stand almost perfectly still in front of a copse while snowflakes fall slowly across the screen. It is an arresting combination of stillness and motion that draws the viewer's attention to the visual/kinetic properties of the image. This juxtaposition of stillness and motion within the frame is as important as the substantive content of the image. In other words, the filmmakers draw our attention both to the fact that we are looking at a group of recently sheared sheep huddling together in the cold, as well as to the more abstract, formal properties of the image. In a similar manner, another of the most striking, and amusing, shots in the film shows a crowd of the sheep against a rise, their coats fringed in the golden light of the rising sun. This beatific tableau is punctured only by the sight, just off centre of the frame, of one of the sheep urinating. The sunlight also catches this fluid, and it too glints in the light as it comes pouring out, seemingly endlessly. As well as indicating the filmmaker's interest in light, composition and movement, the shot is also reflective of a film which gives as much weight to moments of a prosaic, banal or animalistic nature as those moments of great, or sublime, beauty. These moments are all, the film suggests, an integral part of the world that it depicts. This scene also notably mirrors a later one in which John Ahern, one of two men who become central characters in the film during the long central sequence of grazing in the mountains during the summer months, urinates in the open. His back is to the camera but he is in front of, and continuing to talk to, his travelling companion. The inclusion of these two scenes, and particularly the nonchalance with which both John and the sheep undertake this everyday activity, also subtly underscores the parallels between man and beast that the film develops elsewhere.

## 2.2. Enfolded by Sound

In addition to its careful attention to imagery, *Sweetgrass* also features a densely layered and sophisticated soundtrack. Sound plays a crucial role in the film. It is central to the success of the film's presentation of a vivid, multi-sensory, and seemingly fully fleshed out environment. *Sweetgrass*, like many SEL works, opens on a black screen—no image, only sound.<sup>93</sup> We hear before

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<sup>93</sup> A crucial influence on this emphasis on sound in SEL films is the lab's manager, Ernst Karel. Karel is a talented musician, sound recordist, mixer and sound designer who also teaches a class on sonic ethnography as part of his work for the lab. Karel often collaborates with SEL filmmakers on their work and he has been responsible for the

we see. In these opening sequences, sound reaches out and touches us.<sup>94</sup> We become, in the words of Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, ‘a bodily being, enmeshed acoustically, spatially and affectively in the filmic texture’ (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 132).<sup>95</sup> Moreover, the soundtrack also further underscores the filmmaker’s commitment to a non-anthropocentric approach to their subject matter. This is what Grimshaw argues is at the core of Barbash and Taylor’s anthropological understanding of the process; theirs is ‘an approach toward herding that does not privilege or assume the centrality of humans’ (Grimshaw, 2011: 254). *Sweetgrass* pays as much attention to the sheep, the horses, the dogs and the bears that make up this world as it does to the people. To this end, the film’s soundtrack features an extraordinary collage of human, animal and environmental sounds. We hear rivers flowing, the sheep bleating, fire crackling, wind howling, bells tolling, dogs barking, and the noise of humans and animals breathing, eating and expectorating.

Within this complex and layered environmental soundtrack, equal attention is paid to both verbal and non-verbal communication—the sheep communicate with each other through their bleating,<sup>96</sup> while the ranchers communicate with the sheep using phrases with roots in a recognisable language but whose original meaning, according to Castaing-Taylor, the ranchers no longer recall. Thus these calls the ranchers make to the sheep, such as the oft heard ‘coom-biddy’, are primarily about cadence, tonality and volume. Like Robert Gardner’s later work, *Sweetgrass* is a film which challenges the dominance of verbal communication as a means of exploring and engaging with lived experience. Furthermore, all of these sounds exist on approximately the same plane within the

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sound on several of the most successful SEL films, including *Leviathan* (in collaboration with Jacob Ribicoff), *Manakamana* and *Sweetgrass*. Karel has also produced a number of his own audio-only works through the lab, including *Heard Laboratories* (2010), a ‘sonic ethnography’ that captures the aural environments of scientific laboratories at Harvard University; *Swiss Mountain Transport Systems* (2011) which consists of location recordings of a range of different alpine transport vehicles including cable cars and chairlifts; and *Materials Recovery Facility* (2012) which captures the sounds of a recycling facility in Charlestown, Boston. As MacDonald argues, Karel’s important contributions to the body of work produced by the filmmakers associated with the SEL would be difficult to underestimate, and his own sound projects have charted new ground for the documentary form (MacDonald, 2013a: 315).

<sup>94</sup> As Elsaesser and Hagener note, sound ‘possesses tactile and haptic qualities, since it is a phenomenon related to waves, hence also to movement. In order to produce or emit a sound, an object must be touched (the strings of an instrument, the vocal chords, the wind in the trees), and sound in turn makes bodies vibrate. Sound covers and uncovers, touches and enfolds even the spectator’s body’ (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 137).

<sup>95</sup> I will explore the significance of sound to SEL films, and the way in which these scenes prepare us for the multi-sensory representational strategy that will follow, in more detail when I discuss *Leviathan* in the following section.

<sup>96</sup> As MacDonald notes, ‘The primary sound during most of *Sweetgrass* [...] is the bleating of the three thousand ewes and lambs, often a loud and intricate din within which the indecipherable human voices can be heard yelling to one another or using walkie-talkies. Since lambs and ewes bleat in order to remain in communication with one another amid the mass of other sheep, these moments are emblematic of the complex reality of intra- and interspecies communication that has developed within the cultural activity of raising sheep’ (MacDonald, 2013a: 320).

film's audio mix, no one sound privileged above another.<sup>97</sup> One exception to this occurs in a number of scenes where there is a disjunction between the proximity of what we see and what we hear. For instance, in several sequences we see characters framed in extreme long shots whilst the sound we hear is as clear as if we were standing beside them. In part this is a reflection of the way the herders themselves experience this environment—the walkie-talkies they carry facilitate this combination of aural closeness and physical distance.

*Sweetgrass* then, develops a form of experiential knowledge that seems closest to that articulated by MacDougall in a film like *To Live With Herds*. Certain interpretations of the material, such as the proposition that the ranchers, the sheep they tend and the environment they exist in, have a deeply symbiotic relationship, are suggested and implied through the structure, texture, and organising logic of the film. As Grimshaw argues, the film 'draws on the synthetic, spatial, and temporal properties of film to open up a space of suggestive possibilities between the experiential and propositional, between the perceptual and conceptual, between lived realities and images of the American West' (Grimshaw, 2011: 258). Furthermore, as in *To Live With Herds* and *Doon School Chronicles*, the style of the film, although it pays significant attention to the material, sensuous aspects of lived experience, remains rooted in a realist representational strategy. By contrast, in *Leviathan* many of the film's images and sounds exhibit a markedly non-realist quality. They are often opaque and obscure, or images appear so close that it is difficult to decipher exactly what we are looking at. Objects become abstracted in such a way that they become pure colour, shape and texture. *Sweetgrass*'s attention to formal properties, and its emphasis on light, movement and the materiality of the objects depicted anticipates this use of the image in the later film, but *Leviathan* develops it in a much more radical way. It is to *Leviathan* that I now want to turn. Following Laura Marks (2000), in the following analysis I argue that this non-realist strategy stimulates our senses beyond vision and hearing. I conclude that this 'haptic' audiovisual strategy has implications for the kind of knowledge that the film conveys.

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<sup>97</sup> *Forest of Bliss*'s multilayered soundtrack is perhaps the most obvious premonition of this approach (MacDonald, 2013a: 320). Equally though, a line can also be traced through Gardner's film to the complex montage of sounds found in Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (discussed in Chapter 2).

### 3. LEVIATHAN

Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel's *Leviathan* (2012) depicts life on- and overboard a commercial fishing vessel off the coast of New Bedford, Massachusetts. The film features no narration, no subtitles, no on-screen contextual information and an almost complete absence of intelligible spoken dialogue. Instead the film privileges what Hunter Snyder has called 'sensual and immersive modes of communicating' (Snyder, 2013: 178). The commercial fishing vessel would appear to provide the perfect environment in which to experiment with the use of audiovisual media to capture and convey what Castaing-Taylor, echoing Robert Gardner's words, calls 'psycho-physical' experiences (Balsom and Peleg, 2016: 54).<sup>98</sup> It is one that is thick with intense visual, tactile, aural, gustatory and olfactory stimuli. The vessel alone, a feat of extraordinary industrial engineering, is an enormous metal vehicle that is full of heavy machinery, ropes, nets, hooks, waterproofs, life-preservers and other apparatus, all with a distinctive look and texture. Its sonic environment is also thick with a variety of different noises and aural textures, from the roar of the engine and the sound of waves to the voices of the crew members and the cries of sea birds. One can imagine too the salt of the ocean spray on your face and tongue, the smell of fish, wet metal, oil and rubber. Throughout the film it is precisely this, the materiality of the pro-filmic world of the fishing vessel, that is emphasised in *Leviathan*'s audio and imagery: metal chains clank and rattle, the hull of the ship groans and creaks, deep black water flows and bubbles ferociously and the wind roars. Great seething masses of fish hang in huge nets whilst men in thick heavy duty coveralls shout and busy themselves hauling in their wet, writhing bounty. Then when the nets are opened and the fish come cascading out, they slosh onto the deck with a thick, tangible sound. We see guts spilled with the automatic precision of an assembly line worker by men sporting lurid tattoos of mermaids on sweat-covered skin. We see massive cables thick with slime like the umbilical cord of some giant sea creature. The world of *Leviathan* is one of fish blood, cawing seagulls, roiling waves, rusty metal and frayed ropes.

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<sup>98</sup> As I noted in the previous chapter, Gardner, in a letter written in 1953, described the power of film to impart a kind of knowledge that is rooted in sensory experience to the viewer: 'Through very complicated *physio-psychic* processes [...] the net effect possible with film is to impart a credible experience to a spectator' (Gardner quoted in MacDonald, 2013a: 65, emphasis added)



Fig. 25. The flesh of the world. Source: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V er ena Paravel's *Leviathan* (2012)

Castaing-Taylor and Paravel have spoken widely about *Leviathan*. The filmmakers have given numerous interviews in which they talk in detail about the making of the film, their intentions, and the philosophy that underpins their approach to filmmaking.<sup>99</sup> In these interviews, both filmmakers often frame their work in terms of its ability to convey, through audiovisual means, an embodied or affective experience. In one interview Castaing-Taylor describes their intention as a desire,

to give people a very potent aesthetic experience, to give them a glimpse into a reality that they haven't had first hand - a protracted, painful, difficult, visceral, profound embodied experience... Our desire was to give an experience of an experience. (Ward, 2013)

This statement, emphasising the immersive, embodied and experiential qualities of the film, is characteristic of the way *Leviathan*, and SEL work generally, is frequently framed. Alongside the discourse of newness that has surrounded *Leviathan*, many critics, as I noted in my Introduction, have also drawn attention to precisely these kinds of vivid sensuous-aesthetic qualities within the film in their analyses.

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<sup>99</sup> See for instance: (Chang, 2013; Cook, 2012; Jaremko-Greenwold, 2013; MacDonald, 2015).





Fig. 26. Birds in flight.

Source: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V er ena Paravel’s *Leviathan* (2012)

One notable exception to this reading, also briefly discussed in my Introduction, is Christopher Pavsek’s analysis of the film in his article ‘*Leviathan* and the Experience of Sensory Ethnography’ (2015). Pavsek’s article explores the discourse that surrounds the SEL, and *Leviathan* in particular, critiquing what he sees as a tendency of scholars and critics to unquestioningly embrace the way filmmakers associated with the SEL have framed their output, especially in terms of the claims they have made for the ability of audiovisual media to convey or evoke sensory experience. He suggests that many commentators have blindly accepted Castaing-Taylor and Paravel’s own framing of the work: ‘*Leviathan*’s reviewers have accepted quite eagerly its claims along these [immersive] lines’, he writes, ‘seldom calling into doubt the capacities of *Leviathan* or sensory ethnography more broadly to convey embodied or affective experience’ (Pavsek, 2015: 5). He is particularly withering about reviewers who responded to the film with commentaries that attempted to translate their experiences of viewing *Leviathan* into language that conveyed the intensity of their encounter with the film. ‘Generally canny commentators’ he writes

find themselves swept away by the film, and although they know better, they speak and write as if film were able to convey the experience of the profilmic world in unmediated fashion [...] The “film swallows” and “regurgitates” us. The metaphoricity of the language seems forgotten and the (sometimes quite bad) puns that repeat themselves from review to review, conversation to conversation, seem quite literally intended, as if the film’s synesthetic effects were the same as we would undergo if we were on the boat itself. (Pavsek, 2015: 6)

Pavsek describes these reviewers' reactions as 'histrionic'—as if the desire to articulate a cinematic experience in such a way, and to emphasise reactions of this kind, is somehow improper or foolish (Pavsek, 2015: 10). He seems to be suggesting that in responding to the film like this these reviewers have taken leave of their intellect—though presumably not their senses.

### 3.1. Dry Words and Wet Encounters

Pavsek's argument brings to mind Laura Marks' (2002) comments on film criticism as an act of translation. Marks suggests that writing about film always entails the translation—the transformation—of the critic's experience of an audiovisual work into written language. 'When translating from one medium to another', she writes, 'specifically from the relatively more sensuous audiovisual media to the relatively more symbolic medium of words, the task is to make the dry words retain a trace of the wetness of the encounter' (Marks, 2002: x). For Marks then, the task of the film critic is, in part, to do justice to their experience of viewing the film. For her the critic should strive to translate from one medium into the other in a manner that remains as close as possible to this initial encounter. The reviewers who find themselves chastised by Pavsek for their 'histrionic' use of language are attempting to do precisely that. They are attempting to convey, through words, something of the 'wetness' of their encounter with *Leviathan*. In doing so, these writers may well have forgotten the 'metaphoricity' of language, but this slippage of expression, from the metaphorical to the literal, is worth more attention than Pavsek allows. For one thing, this sense of liminality, and what Pavsek sees as an inappropriate blurring of the boundaries between the metaphorical and the literal, is apt for a film that is itself liminal, that itself exists at the boundaries between disciplines, between genres, and between sites of exhibition.

Furthermore, whilst it is of course true that no film conveys the experience of the profilmic world in an entirely unmediated fashion, in dismissing such responses as excessive Pavsek fails to engage in an analysis of the means through which this apparent feeling of immersion is achieved. Clearly something about the film's representational strategy has prompted such a reaction. It would seem that there is something about the film's aesthetic that, for many critics, does indeed bring them close to, if not quite touching, the profilmic world it strives to represent. In his article Pavsek simply

notes the relative ‘thickness’ of the film’s depiction, and remarks that this thickness is achieved in part through ‘the particular manner in which these images and sounds of work accumulate both serially and over time and simultaneously as layerings of image with sound’ (Pavsek, 2015: 7). Pavsek is not the only commentator to make this omission, even the many critics who have drawn attention to the sensuous qualities of *Leviathan* have done so only on a relatively superficial level. What then are the particular audiovisual strategies by which the film achieves this impression of immersion? How can we understand what is apparently happening here through an analysis of the film’s imagery and soundtrack? Laura Marks’ work provides a fitting critical lens through which to analyse the form and content of the film in this regard.

### 3.2. A Haptic Visuality

Marks has advanced a theory for understanding how film and video might convey non-audiovisual sense experiences to viewers. In *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (2000), she contends that our experience of cinema is mimetic, or ‘an experience of bodily similarity to the audiovisual images we take in’ (Marks, 2000: xvii). Her argument rests around the idea that vision itself can be tactile, and that the eyes themselves can ‘function as organs of touch’ (Marks, 2000: 162). She terms this latent capacity a ‘haptic visuality’ (Marks, 2000: xi). For Marks the term haptic visuality ‘emphasises the viewer’s inclination to perceive haptically’, but she suggests that ‘a work itself may offer haptic images’ as well (Marks, 2002: 3). Haptic images, Marks suggests, encourage a ‘bodily relationship between the viewer and the image’ (Marks, 2002: 3) in which our sense of touch is stimulated by the images we see. As I noted my Introduction, for Marks this points to the possibility of vision stimulating the other senses too. Marks argues that haptic images ‘invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate other sensory impressions as well’ (Marks, 2000: 2).

By appealing to one sense in order to represent the experience of another, cinema appeals to the integration and commutation of sensory experience within the body. Each audiovisual image meets a rush of other sensory associations. Audiovisual images call up conscious, unconscious, and non-symbolic associations with touch, taste, and smell, which themselves are not experienced as separate. Each image is synthesized by a body that does not necessarily divide perceptions into different sense modalities. (Marks, 2000: 222)

For Marks certain types of images and certain types of audiovisual media provoke this way of looking more than others. For instance, she suggests that the medium of video is particularly adept at producing such haptically charged images. Marks argues that images produced on video possess a tactile, textural quality that stimulates this bodily relationship between looker and image. The particularities of video, she says, appeal strongly to a haptic as well as an optical visuality. Marks advances this claim through an exploration of the work of a number of video artists who have exploited this property, and concertedly explored ‘the tactile qualities of video’ (Marks, 2002: 3). Marks suggests that Seoungho Cho, for instance, ‘has developed sophisticated ways to make the video image dissolve and resolve into layers whose relations to the foreground of the image and the position of the camera lens are uncertain’ (Marks, 2002: 1). In this way ‘the image gives up its optical clarity to engulf the viewer in a flow of tactile impressions’ (Marks, 2002: 1).

Marks acknowledges that this emphasis on video’s multisensory properties may seem somewhat counterintuitive given that it is film that is the medium that is more obviously physical: ‘It is commonly argued that film is a tactile medium and video an optical one, since film can be actually worked with the hands’ (Marks, 2002: 9). But as Marks notes, since the majority of editing now takes place using digital post-production technology—even when a work has been shot on film—this distinction is considerably less significant than it once was. For Marks then, it is not the physical properties of the medium that give video its haptic character. Instead it is video’s inherent optical limitations. This appeal to a haptic visuality is, Marks argues, in part due to the visual shortcomings of video: ‘While film approximates the degree of detail of human vision, video provides much less detail’, she writes (Marks, 2002: 10). For Marks, ‘the main sources of haptic visuality in video include the constitution of the image from a signal, video’s low contrast ratio, the possibilities of electronic and digital manipulation, and video decay’ (Marks, 2002: 9).<sup>100</sup> It is these visual limitations, inherent in the medium, that Marks suggests prompted the artists she discusses to explore the medium’s other qualities. The works by these artists, Marks writes, ‘express a longing for a multi-sensory experience that pushes beyond the audiovisual properties of the medium’ (Marks, 2002: 3). It is the lack of resolution, depth of field and detail in video when compared with

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<sup>100</sup> ‘Other sources of video’s tactile, or at least insufficiently visual, qualities’, Marks writes, ‘are its pixel density and contrast ratio. VHS has about 350,000 pixels per frame, while 35mm film has twenty times that. The contrast ratio of video is 30:1, or approximately one tenth of that of 16mm or 35mm film’ (Marks, 2002: 10).

film that forces these works to strive for something else. Lacking in one quality, Marks suggests that these videos push for another.

### 3.3. PixelVision and the GoPro

Marks was writing at a time when digital video technologies were still relatively new, and although some of the artists she discusses use digital, many of them also use analogue video technology such as VHS to make and exhibit their work. Marks also discusses filmmakers who work with a camera produced by Fisher-Price called the PixelVision. The PixelVision, also known as the PXL-2000, is a discontinued toy video camera that used audiocassette tapes to record moving images. The PixelVision produces extremely pixellated, low resolution black and white imagery that has a distinctive look and texture. The camera, marketed at children, was a commercial failure and was soon pulled from the market. But the toy eventually found its niche in an unexpected place. It developed a following amongst underground and experimental filmmakers due to its affordability, small size and distinctive low resolution imagery (Revkin, 2000).<sup>101</sup> Marks describes the format as an ‘ideal haptic medium’, writing that the camera, ‘which cannot focus on objects in depth, gives a curious attention to objects and surfaces in extreme close-up’ (Marks, 2002: 10). The grainy imagery renders objects ‘indistinct while drawing attention to the act of perception of textures’ (Marks, 2002: 10). In the same manner as the more conventional video formats she discusses, it is in part this lack of clarity which, Marks suggests, promotes a haptic way of seeing. In these works ‘the image gives up its optical clarity to engulf the viewer in a flow of tactile impressions’ (Marks, 2002: 1). The PixelVision has something of a contemporary parallel in the shape of the ‘GoPro’. Though it is not marketed at children, its imagery is of a significantly higher quality, and it has been commercially successful in a way that the PixelVision never was, the GoPro is also an extremely small, portable and lightweight video camera. Paravel & Castaing-Taylor utilised the camera extensively in *Leviathan* and its optical and aural limitations—as well as its unique strengths—

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<sup>101</sup> Notable video artists who have used the PixelVision to produce work include Sadie Benning, Azian Nurudin, Micheal O’Reilly and Dave Ryan. In a testament to the toy’s popularity and credentials within a particular cultural milieu during the early 1990s, one of the characters in Richard Linklater’s digressive ensemble portrait of a community of loosely connected ‘slackers’ in Austin, Texas owns a PixelVision that he is using for an art project. Linklater uses footage shot with the toy in a scene towards the end of the film. In *Slacker* (1991) the camera’s indistinct imagery imbues the short sequence with a dreamlike quality, the lack of clarity evoking a kind of un-reality that is further emphasised by the jazz-punk music and the various philosophical and conspiratorial ramblings of its characters heard on the soundtrack.

helped to shape the aesthetic of *Leviathan* in a manner that is similar to the way that the PixelVision's limitations shaped the aesthetic of the films that Marks discusses.

### 3.4. All At Sea

Castaing-Taylor and Paravel's journey to *Leviathan*'s aesthetic was, like Brakhage's quest to find the appropriate means through which to represent his experiences in the morgue for *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971), a process of discovery. The filmmakers went through a similar process of experimentation, searching for a way to represent cinematically the world they had encountered. They searched for a means to convey the overwhelming, physical nature of their experiences. Initially Castaing-Taylor had set out to make a more conventional documentary about the fishing and shipping industry more broadly, settling on New Bedford, Massachusetts as his location because of its connection to Melville's *Moby Dick* (Hoare, 2013). To this end Castaing-Taylor and Paravel, who joined the project shortly after its conception, had together filmed around 50 hours of footage on land. They shot initially in the local factories that produce the dredges, nets and ice used by the fishing boats. Eventually though, the fishermen they had gotten to know through this process invited them out to sea. Once they started filming on the boat, the filmmakers apparently lost interest in the activity on land. 'There was something going on out there that was much more cosmic and profound' Castaing-Taylor told Dennis Lim in an interview for *The New York Times* (Lim, 2012). Whilst at sea the world that the filmmakers encountered was a world of harsh conditions and back breaking physical labour. In order to film the activities on the boat they found themselves sticking to the same schedules as the fishermen, working 20 hour days and sleeping little. Their working process mirrored the labour of the fishermen in other respects too. Filming at sea was by all accounts an intense and physically demanding operation: 'One of us often had to tie themselves to the boat, then hold on to the other, to stabilise the camera and/or stop them falling overboard', Castaing-Taylor and Paravel told *The Guardian*, 'as greenhorns, we also had to take more care than the fishermen not to be hit on the head by flying winches and chains' (Hoare, 2013). This change of location also led to what turned out to be a fortuitous occurrence that would have a significant impact on the film's aesthetic. Whilst at sea the filmmakers lost one of the large and bulky conventional video cameras that they had been filming with up to that point (Johnston, 2013).

Prompted in part by this loss of equipment, they decided to experiment with a different approach. On their second trip out, they tried out the GoPro.

Initially designed to take photographs of surfers without the need for expensive professional equipment, the technology started off life as a 35mm stills camera and has since evolved into a line of small and ultra light weight HD video cameras that are still predominantly used by surfers, cyclists and practitioners of other extreme sports. The GoPro's tiny size and portability, along with the extensive range of associated accessories that allow it to be attached to helmets, ski-poles or even strapped to a person's chest, make it the perfect tool for capturing footage of the stunts performed by extreme sports enthusiasts. In producing *Leviathan*, Castaing-Taylor and Paravel attached these cameras to crewmember's helmets, lashed them on to the ends of wooden poles and cast these over the side of the boat and into the ocean (Lim, 2012). On viewing the footage from these cameras Castaing-Taylor and Paravel were struck by how compelling the results were. The material seemed to evoke their experiences of being at sea more effectively than the conventional camera footage. It was, Castaing-Taylor noted, 'more corporeal, more embodied than the most frenetic vérité footage. There's this charge of subjectivity. But at the same time it renounces any directorial intent' (Lim, 2012). In another interview Castaing-Taylor expounded on this point further,

Looking at our footage, we were struck by a paradox, which was that we felt we were seeing moving images and sounds that were simultaneously divorced from shoulder-mounted, optical POV that you associate with documentaries [...] it seemed to be completely disembodied, and separated from directorial intentionality in that way. And yet it seemed to be much more yoked to a subjective, embodied experience of the world that you would have when you're actually in the world, not when you're just making a film. So it was both disembodied and embodied, and sort of an objective manifestation of a subjective experience. (Jaremko-Greenwold, 2013)

The GoPro footage therefore produced an aesthetic that provided at least part of the solution to the filmmakers' desire, in Paravel's words, 'to capture the experience of being there' (Cook, 2012). The portability of the cameras enabled the filmmakers to capture 'first-person' shots from both a human and non-human perspective. The acrobatic shots on and around the boat that were captured through the use of wooden poles result in imagery that often gives the impression of a bird's or fish eye view of the ocean. This strategy also gives the film a kind of restless motion—a motion that is intimately connected to the movement of the boat and the fishermen, and the constant motion of

the birds in flight and the swimming fish. But using the GoPro had aesthetic consequences beyond those that are a result of its portability and its capacity to evoke a first person perspective.



Fig. 27. First-person perspective. Source: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V er ena Paravel's *Leviathan* (2012)

The use of the GoPro also meant that the filmmakers relinquished a level of both optical and aural clarity. The camera is capable of capturing high-definition video, and it functions well in conditions in which there is a lot of light. But the camera produces grainy, saturated images when used at night and in conditions with harsh artificial light. The images produced by the GoPro in low light have a comparable quality to the kinds of images the PixelVision produces, only in colour rather than black and white. Castaing-Taylor and Paravel embraced this, and the grainy, indistinct imagery is a central part of the film's aesthetic. The filmmakers also used the camera's small in-built microphone to record some of the film's audio, again the mic was pushed to its limits by the harsh conditions present on the ship, and this too becomes a central part of the film's sensory onslaught and a key component of the film's remarkable sound design. *Leviathan*, like *Sweetgrass*, begins in complete darkness. On the soundtrack we hear wind blowing, the roaring of the ocean and the clanking of metal chains. We know instinctively where we are through what we hear before we know where we are through what we can see. As Michel Chion suggests, 'It is the ear that renders the image visible' (Chion quoted in Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 145). This sequencing, in which the sound arrives before the image, reflects the importance accorded to audio within the lab's work more generally. In SEL films 'sound is conceived not as an adjunct to image, an accompaniment,



but as a complex, often intense auditory surround within which the imagery unfolds' (MacDonald, 2013a: 264).<sup>102</sup>

Accompanying the blackness of the screen in the film's opening sequence is the noise, quiet at first, of wind and the sound of crashing waves—noises that begin to initiate us into *Leviathan*'s singular filmic world. As these noises gradually get louder we hear what sounds like a metal chain being cranked in. Finally the darkness of the image begins to lift as an abstract blotch of colour—an orangey red—bobs in and out of the bottom right of the frame. The screen remains predominantly dark throughout the beginning of this sequence, but for the occasional flash of light bouncing off what looks like machinery. The glistening of harsh industrial light on black water creates a kaleidoscopic, flickering and abstract effect. In this night-time scene the camera struggles and the images are fuzzy, indistinct, oversaturated and underexposed. It is around thirty seconds before these abstract images dissolve into something we can recognise. As the camera continues to swing and bob around, apparently un-tethered, we slowly begin to piece together bits and pieces of what we are seeing, but this recognition still only comes in brief flashes. We see what looks like an orange life preserver, a gloved hand, heavy industrial machinery—all drenched in water and glistening in the artificial light. Apart from these brief flashes of recognition, it is a full two and half minutes before we see what we might call a stable, recognisable image—objects that we can name with certainty, and which we can use to orientate ourselves within this murky maritime world. When that image does come though, it arrives with considerable force.

The camera pans shakily to the right, darkness again—the blackness of the ocean this time—before as if from nowhere, wrenched from the deep, a huge metal container rips out of the water towards us, crashing loudly into the side of the ship. After the metal container has been hauled aboard the boat we see a figure standing on the side of the vessel in waterproof coveralls, we see the black and white foam of the ocean, and with greater clarity we see the chains, the body of the rusting metal

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<sup>102</sup> As I noted in my analysis of *Sweetgrass*, sound plays a crucial role in fleshing out the environments we see on screen in SEL films. Sound is an element of film that is often neglected in film analyses in favour of the more immediately obvious role that imagery plays. Or as Gianluca Sergi puts it, within film studies 'sound seems like an obstacle in the way of the essence of cinema, the image' (Sergi, 1998: 157). But as a number of commentators have noted, sound in Sensory Ethnography Lab films is integral, and plays more than a supporting role. For instance, MacDonald notes that sound in *Leviathan* has a 'sensory impact at least as powerful and complex as the imagery. In this case, the near-deafening noise of the fishing boat and of the processing of the fish and shellfish create an aural "nest" within which human speech can rarely be made out' (MacDonald, 2012). Meanwhile, Hunter Snyder contends that 'the amplification of the incessant hum of diesel engines and hydraulic pumps [are] banal yet sensory depictions' that make for 'an internal emotional reality that takes over the body from the inside' (Snyder, 2013: 178).

vessel itself, and more of the ship's machinery. The camera then pans to the left and we see brief flashes of a hand wearing thick blue rubber gloves pulling on a large metal chain. It now becomes clear that this sequence has been filmed entirely from someone's point of view; the camera is attached to one of the crewmember's helmets and we are seeing everything in this sequence from their perspective.<sup>103</sup> From these shots it finally becomes clear that we are aboard a fishing vessel, though we have known this with our ears, through our bodies, even before we finally see it with our eyes.

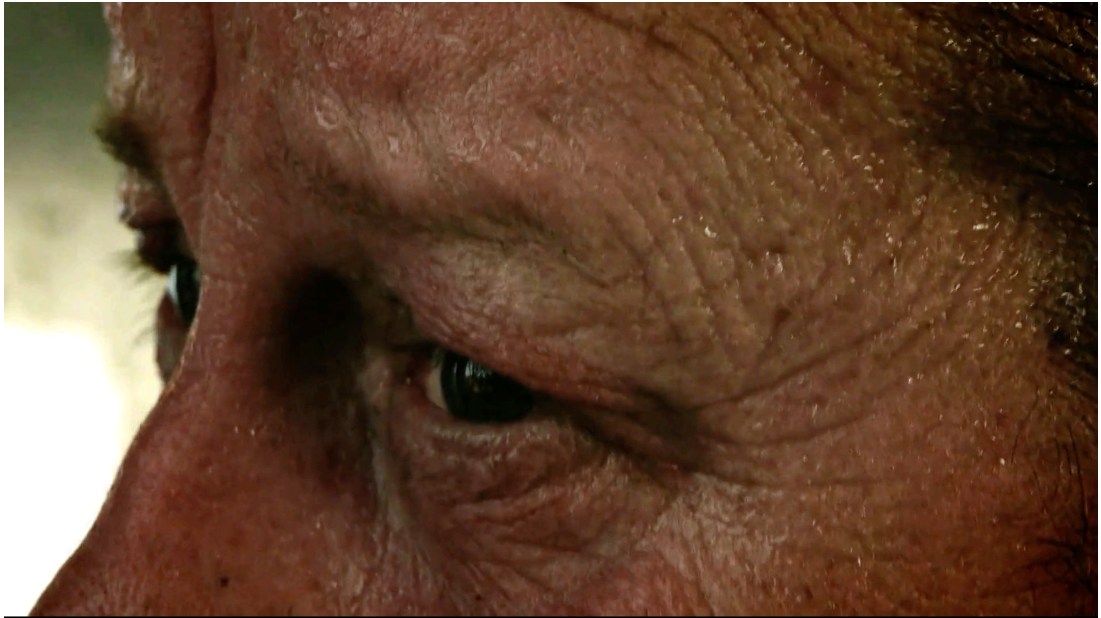


Fig. 28. A landscape of skin. Source: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V  rina Paravel's *Leviathan* (2012)

Throughout *Leviathan*, as in this sequence, images are shown in extreme close-up. In one memorable shot later in the film the camera lingers on one of the fishermen's faces, seemingly examining every pore in the man's skin, which appears as a kind of wrinkled landscape thick with sweat and dirt. However, although it is a perspective on an individual's body that we do not typically see in day-to-day life, this image remains recognisable as a man's face. Other uses of the extreme close-up within *Leviathan* have a more disorientating effect. In these shots the technique has the principal effect of defamiliarising the object we are looking at. Things become alien, unfamiliar, the image becomes detached from the objects they represent—the grotesque bug eyes of the fish, metal chains dripping with water, hands in thick blue rubber gloves, tattoos, a sweating

<sup>103</sup> This view mirrors the perspective of 'first-person shooter' video games. In these games the player takes control of a character and inhabits their viewpoint, so that the player sees everything as if through the character's eyes—a kind of virtual, embodied engagement with the game. In a first-person shooter the hands of the player's character can normally be seen at the bottom of the screen. As the name suggests, the hands will often be holding a gun or some other kind of weapon. In a similar fashion, here we see the crew member's hands directly in front of us and helping to guide the chain that is being mechanically rewound into the vessel.

face, and figures head-to-toe in blood stained heavy duty waterproof coveralls; all, in their proximity to the camera, become abstracted. In this way these images of things are partially emptied of their meaning as representative of objects that have a name, instead it is predominantly the textures of things that we see. We do not so much see images of objects, but rather, through the use of disorienting and uncompromisingly extreme close-ups, the materiality of these objects.



Fig. 29. Nets recast as abstract shapes and colours.  
Source: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V er ena Paravel's *Leviathan* (2012)

## CONCLUSION

It is this strategy that brings the film closest to realising the filmmakers' intention to use their cameras to, in Castaing-Taylor's words, 'represent that psycho-physical experience of being at sea' (Balsom and Peleg, 2016: 54). In utilising such haptic audiovisual techniques, I contend that the film produces bodily responses in the viewer that, in Bill Nichols' words, 'float in a sea of questions because they lack an interpretative frame within which they can be addressed' (Nichols, 1994a: 77). For Nichols, such aesthetic, visceral responses represent a short-circuit that,

translates into expressive excess, spillage from reactions unconnected to a self-reflexive, consciousness-raising means of contextualising and understanding them. Instead of comprehension, assimilation and interpretation these reactions surge past the mind in a guise that allows expression to what ultimately remains repressed within the unconscious. (Nichols, 1994a: 77)

These 'visceral reactions' that are unconfined by a 'descriptive or explanatory grid' (Nichols, 1994a: 76) represent a fundamentally non-cognitive, embodied form of knowledge. This is a kind of knowledge that is always acquired by the ethnographer during their lengthy immersion in a particular locale. An ethnographer always discovers what a particular place feels like to inhabit, they experience its smells, its sounds, its heat, its humidity. But these experiences are often elided in conventional ethnographies, filmic or otherwise. *Leviathan* though, is an audiovisual work that attempts to convey not just the visible and audible elements of reality, but something of the fleshy, multi-sensory elements of lived experience too. It points to the possibility that film can do more than simply convey propositional, disembodied knowledge, facts and information, but that they can be used to convey alternative forms of, sensuous, non-verbal, embodied knowledge too.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis I have explored the relationship between cinematic techniques and knowledge in the non-fiction film. Drawing on previous scholarship on the relationship between film form and ways of knowing, I identified and traced a development within documentary and ethnographic film away from conceptions of the medium as a means of conveying disembodied, discursive, propositional knowledge and towards conceptions of the medium as a means of engaging more fully with lived experience and conveying forms of knowledge that are experiential, embodied and fundamentally non-cognitive and non-verbal. My argument throughout, the narrative I constructed, and my analysis of the relationship between cinematic techniques and knowledge, was shaped in part, as a response to two of the most common critical propositions that have been made about the films produced under the aegis of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab. The first is that SEL work represents a radical new form of non-fiction filmmaking. The second is that SEL work offers an immersive, multisensory cinematic experience. In response to the first proposition, and as a counter to the discourse of newness within commentary on the SEL, the first four chapters of this thesis offered an account of a number of the lab's most significant cinematic precursors.

In Chapter 1, I discussed the work of some of the first individuals to use film and photography in the service of anthropology. Looking in particular at the work of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, I argued that because of their positivist-empirical conception of film and their emphasis on capturing supposedly objective 'data', the films they produced based on their fieldwork in Bali in the 1930s utilised a detached aesthetic that privileged the communication of what, following Bill Nichols, I described as a 'disembodied' knowledge. Although scientific conceptions of ethnographic film have long since been rejected as a kind of 'naive positivism' they have nonetheless had a significant impact on the development of the form and the cinematic techniques that certain anthropologists have deemed appropriate. The history of ethnographic film has been characterised by a tension or conflict between conceptions of the practice as a science and conceptions of it as a creative or even artistic activity. I suggested that this tension and conflict has both stifled and encouraged ways of thinking about and using the moving image within anthropology.

In Chapter 2 I discussed the work of John Grierson and the British documentary movement, a group of non-fiction filmmakers who exhibited an instrumental conception of film similar to Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's. Though, as I demonstrated, their conception of film differed in a number of important ways from Mead and Bateson's. I argued that while critical commentary on the documentary movement has often focused on their work as an example of an informational, aesthetically restrained form of documentary filmmaking that privileges the communication of propositional knowledge, there are also works by filmmakers associated with the movement that suggest a different conception of the relationship between film form and knowledge. I suggested that it is possible to identify two tendencies within the work of the British documentary movement. On the one hand, there is an expository/illustrative tendency. Work within this strand often features a kind of 'utilitarian' aesthetic, and privileges the communication of information or propositional knowledge. Common cinematic techniques used in this strand include expository intertitles and didactic 'voice of god' or 'voice of authority' commentary in order to convey knowledge to the viewer about, for instance, industrial processes or pressing social issues. On the other hand, there is also a tendency that I describe as poetic/phenomenal within the films of the British documentary movement. I suggested that films within this tendency pay much closer attention to film form, and exhibit a more aesthetic, poetic sensibility that is often concerned with conveying the 'rhythm' or 'feel' of a particular place or environment. In doing so I suggested that this work anticipates and prefigures later developments within the documentary that evince different, and perhaps more radical, conceptions of knowledge.

In Chapter 3 I discussed the work of three filmmakers who challenged the instrumental and expository approaches outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. I argued that Jean Rouch, and David and Judith MacDougall—who were integral to the development of two related movements within documentary and ethnographic film that had the notion of 'observation' at their core—challenged the epistemological assumptions underlying both the scientific approach to documentary film and the expository, didactic tendency of Griersonian documentary. I suggested that Rouch's work—as a result of his emphasis on a kind of shared, participatory filmmaking, his conception of the camera as a catalyst that could be used to prompt, reveal and provoke, and his understanding of filmmaking as an interactive process between subject, filmmaker and audience—embodied a very different conception of the relationship between film and knowledge to the work that had come before it. In

Rouch's work, not only were the social and geographical worlds of the films' subjects rendered more vividly, but the audience was also expected to actively search for meaning within the film, rather than being told what to think or what conclusions to draw from the material presented. These were qualities that the MacDougalls would replicate and extend in their own work. I suggested that in the MacDougalls' work there is an emphasis on both a fuller rendering of the subject's lives and their environments, and a more restrained, open and suggestive use of textual devices that prompt the viewer to actively search for meaning within the film. In films like *To Live With Herds* and *Doon School Chronicles*, there is a synthesis of a filmmaking style that pays close attention to the materiality of lived experience with a form of intellectual inquiry that proceeds through cinematic, rather than predominantly textual, means. Certain interpretations of the material and certain meanings are suggested through the way in which the filmmakers structure and present their combinations of image and sound. I concluded with the suggestion that this way of knowing through film remains to a certain extent cognitive and conceptual. These filmmakers also remained fundamentally committed to realist representational strategies, and to a faithful rendering of the lives and experiences of their subjects as the subjects themselves understood them.

In Chapter 4, I turned my attention to the work of two filmmakers for whom cinema was a means of crafting much more subjective, personal visions of the world, and who attempted to move away from language entirely as a means of engaging with lived experience. Both Robert Gardner and Stan Brakhage used film in a way that was less discursive, less immediately legible and more sensuous, phenomenal and evocative. I suggested that theirs was a cinema in which a commitment to art and aesthetic experimentation was inseparable from an engagement with a fundamentally non-verbal form of knowledge. Both filmmakers also shared a sense of themselves as artists, and both were committed to exploring a much wider range of the creative possibilities open to filmmakers. I suggested that in pushing at and expanding the range of cinematic techniques used within non-fiction filmmaking beyond those conventionally deemed acceptable, these filmmakers pursued ways of knowing beyond language.

Finally, and in response to the second common critical proposition about the work of the SEL—that their films offer an immersive, multisensory experience—in Chapter 5 I argued that Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel's *Leviathan*, building on developments that Castaing-Taylor

and Ilisa Barbash initiated with the earlier SEL film *Sweetgrass*, conveys what I describe as ‘embodied knowledge’. Here I drew on the work of Laura Marks in order to argue that it is through ‘haptic’ audiovisual strategies that the film is able to convey this kind of knowledge. While several scholars have noted the SEL’s continuities with a larger experimental tradition within visual anthropology that includes work by filmmakers like Robert Gardner, David MacDougall and Jean Rouch, and both SEL filmmakers themselves and other scholars have identified the importance of aesthetics to the epistemological inquiries embodied in SEL films, there had yet to be an engagement with the way in which the SEL’s filmmaking philosophy, and SEL films’ engagement with ways of knowing, is related to, and evolved from, the various earlier currents in non-fiction filmmaking that I explored in this thesis. In other words, the work of the SEL had not yet received a sustained analysis that situated it within a context that considered the way in which the filmmakers who have shaped and influenced the SEL’s approach to filmmaking themselves thought about the relationship between cinematic techniques and knowledge.

The focus of this thesis—the relationship between cinematic techniques and ways of knowing—could be extended to evaluate a broader range of work produced under the aegis of the SEL, as well as much more recent work by the lab not considered within this study—such as Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel’s *Somniloquies* (2017). An exploration of the impact that a film’s context of exhibition has on the ways in which audiences engage with non-fiction filmmaking, and the kinds of knowledge that a documentary conveys, might also be pursued through an analysis of the SEL work that has been produced for exhibition in a gallery context. Focus could also shift to explore the audio works produced within the SEL by figures like Ernst Karel. In addition to this, a more thorough exploration of the influence of phenomenology on the lab’s work, including the work of film theorists such as Vivian Sobchack, as well as the philosophy of John Dewey, would also prove fruitful in terms of extending this study’s exploration into embodied ways of knowing. A future study might also take a more critical perspective with regards to documentary work that, as David MacDougall articulated to me in a recent email exchange, has ‘tried to get away from the didactic film, considering it a coercive kind of cinema’. Such a critical perspective might think about how this newer work, as MacDougall put it, ‘might itself be considered simply a new form of



coercive cinema in which “sound design” and visual manipulation replace the voice-of-God commentary’.<sup>104</sup>

More broadly, the central focus of this study could be extended further to include an exploration of the aesthetic and epistemological possibilities afforded by virtual reality documentary filmmaking. Future research could examine the relationship between the form of VR documentaries and knowledge production and transmission. Possible case studies might include the work of the British virtual reality company VR City, or the international VR production company Here Be Dragons, formerly known as Vrse.works. As Gabo Arora, one of Here Be Dragon’s ‘creators’, suggested in a recent interview,

VR is [...] less dominated by information sharing [...] It is more about making you feel. The concern is not as much about, “Did you understand?” but [more about], “Do you feel present?” A storyteller in VR has to communicate much more subtly, which allows for more reflection, more poetry, as there is more experimentation. (Howe, 2016)

Alongside the vivid sense of immersion that VR documentaries offer through optical means, developments in haptic feedback technologies, as well as the possibility of the addition of olfactory stimuli such as the environmental smells that accompanied the exhibition of three VR films at this year’s Tribeca film festival (Mufson, 2017), suggests that VR could provide fertile territory for further critical work that builds on the theoretical developments of this study. Popular and scholarly interest in non-fiction filmmaking is on the increase, and as the publication of the recent collection of essays and accompanying visual and aural material *Beyond Text? Critical Practices and Sensory Anthropology* (Cox et al., 2016) demonstrates, so too is scholarly interest in the spaces between audiovisual media, art, anthropology, and sensory ways of knowing. It is my hope that this piece of research will help scholars to continue to explore the ways in which knowledge and the senses are being brought together within the world of contemporary non-fiction storytelling. It will be fascinating to follow developments in this area, and to see what new forms of documentary and ethnographic film arise in response to the SEL’s work. As Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash suggest in the epigraph with which I opened this thesis, what is initially exciting may soon become commonplace and exhausted, and the challenge then, ‘is to invent and improvise new twists to old styles, not for their own sake, but as you wrestle with and respond to your subject [...] Life will

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<sup>104</sup> Personal correspondence with the author, November 2016.

always run away from our films and exceed our grasp, but the task, however vain, is to run after it again' (Barbash and Taylor, 1997: 33).

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