

Making Strange: Encounters with the Para-human

The experience of watching *Leviathan* (2012), the breakout film by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V  r  na Paravel, is one of displacement and disorientation. At any given moment, viewers may find themselves thrown violently across the deck of a fishing trawler, thrashed by wind and rain, tangled up in clanking chains, suspended in a flock of gulls, or submerged in a violent sea. In this chaos of movement, color, and sound, the human figure cedes its usual position at center stage — relegated to the edges of the frame, obscured in both sound and image by machinery and the elements, the fishermen are often just snippets of saturated color, or disembodied laboring limbs, when not absent altogether. As many have rightfully noted, this de-centering and relativizing of the human within larger ecologies of “machinic, natural, animal, and human” relations constitute the film’s post-humanist aesthetics and politics.¹

There are moments in *Leviathan*, however, which suggest not only the de-centering, but moreover the defamiliarizing of the human. In one such moment, about halfway into the film, an abrupt cut brings us to one of the film’s few sustained extreme close-ups. As our eyes try to adjust, and as the camera itself sways in and out of focus, we struggle to make sense of what we are seeing: a mottled surface, rough and covered in dirt, in which a metal hook seems to be embedded. We appear to be looking at skin — animal skin — but only when the camera begins to move upwards, as tattoos come into view and the outline of an arm begins to take shape, do we realize that the strange topography before us is in fact human. For one brief moment, the distortion of scale takes the human and makes it strange, in much the same way that the film as a whole takes a common and time-worn human activity — commercial fishing — and makes it violently unfamiliar. Thus revealing the “monstrosity in human experience [...] or making us suspect that our life in this world is a supernatural horror,” *Leviathan* points to the filmmakers’ abiding interest not only in the post-human, but also in what we might call the *para*-human, or the strangeness within.²

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Leviathan is the first collaboration between Castaing-Taylor and Paravel, both of whom are artists, anthropologists, and filmmakers working out of Harvard University’s Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL). Neither has had formal training in filmmaking or visual arts, but rather has arrived at a moving-image practice by way of academia. Castaing-Taylor — the Lab’s founder and director, and Professor of Visual Arts and of Anthropology at Harvard — received a PhD in cultural anthropology from the University of Berkeley, and before that studied visual anthropology at the University of Southern California with the pioneering ethnographic filmmaker Timothy Asch. Paravel, who received a PhD in Science, Technology, and Society from the Universit   de Toulouse II and later worked with the renowned philosopher and

¹ Selmin Kara & Alanna Thain. “Sonic Ethnographies: *Leviathan* and New Materialisms in Documentary.” In *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*. New York: Routledge (2015): 188.

² *Ibid.*, 186.

anthropologist Bruno Latour, joined the lab in 2008, a few years after its founding. They had each made films before working together, most notably *Sweetgrass* (2009, Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash) and *Foreign Parts* (2010, Véréna Paravel and J.P. Sniadecki), both of which were received with critical acclaim. But *Leviathan* marked the beginning of a collaborative practice that has since yielded a growing number of short films, installations, and feature-length works, including the most recent *somniloquies* (2017) and *Caniba* (2017).

To better understand this work, it helps to have a sense of the larger context in which it is produced, namely the aforementioned Sensory Ethnography Lab, which describes itself as an experimental laboratory that “promotes innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography.”³ Positioned within and between various fields of practice and discourse — including documentary, independent and experimental cinema, visual arts, and academic disciplines such as anthropology, visual studies, and science and technology studies — the Lab provides “an academic and institutional context for the development of creative work and research that is itself constitutively visual or acoustic,” rather than textual or discursive.⁴ The SEL supports various programs of study within the university by offering classes in the history, theory, and practice of ethnographic media, but these comprise just one part of a larger, shifting constellation of events and screenings; production and post-production equipment and workspace; lab managers, instructors, students, fellows, visiting artists; films, art works, ideas, texts. The Lab also supports the production of film and media projects by its students, alumni, faculty, and affiliated artists, not only practically or materially, but just as importantly, by creating an extended community of makers, viewers, and interlocutors with a shared critical vocabulary.

While the works that comes out of the Lab vary in both topic and aesthetic approach, many share an underlying resistance to the discursive overdetermination of meaning — a position that was first articulated by Castaing-Taylor in his 1996 article “Iconophobia: How Anthropology Lost It at the Movies.”⁵ In this polemic against the traditional centrality of text and discursivity in anthropology, Castaing-Taylor denounces what he sees as the discipline’s aversion to images, particularly filmic images. He contends that “what makes film so captivating is that it is something other, or more, than just language” — giving access to forms of sensory, embodied or experiential knowledge that often elude language altogether — and he calls for forms of ethnographic and documentary filmmaking that attend to the many dimensions of the world that cannot be rendered textually.⁶ In making his point, he draws from the writing of other practitioner-theorists, such as Dai Vaughan, who advocates for an approach to documentary that defers “semantic closure”: resisting the more conventional structures of argumentation,

³ <http://sel.fas.harvard.edu/index.html>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lucien Castaing-Taylor. “Iconophobia: How Anthropology Lost It at the Movies.” *Transition*, no. 69 (1996): 64-88.

⁶ Ibid., 87.

demonstration, or rhetoric and instead fostering ambiguity, thus remaining open to the ambiguity, density, and plenitude of lived experience.⁷

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For some, this open attention to the material, visual, and sonic density of the environment — an attention not directed by the traditional documentary privileging of the human voice — is what makes *Leviathan* a post-humanist work. In removing the human perspective from its usual position as organizing principle, the film allows us “to listen to the myriad voices of [...] a world where human and nonhuman futures are increasingly entangled in their mutual uncertainty.”⁸

To this, however, I would add that *Leviathan*, and the work of Castaing-Taylor and Paravel more generally, call for us to attend not only to the post-human, but perhaps more importantly, to the *para*-human. By this, I mean the strangeness of the human itself, or the human seen as strange — aspects of human existence that are quite real, but that are offset from normative conceptions of the human: of human agency, subjectivity, consciousness, even our material or physical existence. The filmmakers’ two latest films take as a starting point the defamiliarizing of the human that we first saw in *Leviathan* and develop this impulse further. In *somniloquies*, the entire film is given over to the fantastic and bewildering world of Dion McGregor’s unconscious, while *Caniba* discomfitingly explores the desires and practices of cannibal Issei Sagawa and his masochist brother, Jun. In both instances, we are witness to human behavior that is freakish, incredible, nonsensical, unreal — but all the more fascinating, or horrifying, precisely because it is still *of* the human.

It is interesting to note in these latest films some of the formal departures from *Leviathan*, and particularly the renewed importance of language, speech, and the human voice, which dominate both films. What becomes clear, however, especially in *somniloquies*, is that language does not function as a discursive guarantor of meaning, or as an access point to a coherent subjectivity, as it traditionally has functioned in documentary. Rather, in these films, language serves as a conduit to the *para*-human: instead of making sense of the human world, it makes it strange.

⁷ Dai Vaughan. “The Aesthetics of Ambiguity.” In *For Documentary: Twelve Essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press (1999): 81-83.

⁸ Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn. “*Leviathan*: An Ethnographic Dream.” *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 31.1 (2015): 52.