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THE PUNK CHILD OF ART: SEEING AND BEING SEEN

Like a band of filmic pirates, the Sensory Lab plunders what they need from documentary to create something fresh. These are musings arisen from discussions with Lucian Castaing -Taylor and works from the lab.

WORDS EMMA DAVIE * PHOTO LEVIATHAN COURTESY OF ARRÊTE TON CINÉMA

When I came up for air after seeing *Leviathan* by Lucian Castaing Taylor and Véréna Paravel, I, like many, was amazed by this quantum leap in filmmaking that plunges us into the gills, bulging eyes, swooping seagulls and Bosch like world of a fishing boat off Nantucket Bay.

There are no establishing shots, no interviews, no contextual information; just the purity of felt experience and an awareness of the unknowableness of nature which runs counter to the resolute anthropocentric stance of most documentaries. Deliberately disorientating, sounds emerge in the dark along with insistent textures of close-ups of scales, skin and tattooed flesh. A disembodied fish head stuck on the draining slot on the deck of the boat, an arm with a mermaid tattoo all create questions in our minds as they jostle for meaning and visibility. But the credits made me even more curious. Here are the names, written in mock Gothic text, of the fish which appeared in the film – *Melanogrammus Aeglefinus*, *Pollachius Virens* etc.

The purity of felt experience and an awareness of the unknowableness of nature which runs counter to the resolute anthropocentric stance of most documentaries

This grunge attitude made me feel I was an accomplice more than an audience, witnessing a band of filmic pirates plundering what they need from documentary to create something fresh – but also acutely aware of the limitations of language to define experience.

Somewhere up there were the words – Sensory Ethnography Lab. Intrigued, I sought out more.

These musings have arisen from seeing a sample of their archive and also from discussions with Lucian Castaing Taylor, its co-founder. He was at the Edinburgh Film Festival where *Leviathan* won the Michael Powell Award.

Initially from the UK, Lucian is an artist and filmmaker who started the SEL in Harvard University but is insistent on its identity as a loose community of self-confessed “recovering” anthropologists, filmmakers, sound artists, all mistrustful of the hegemony of the written word. Lucien is also director of the Film Study Centre in Harvard, started by Robert Gardner (whose *Forest of Bliss* provides a great lineage of poetic film observation) but wanted to create an experimental space where anthropologists and scientists collided with a creative practice. Shunning the posture of a teacher, he talks of their process as a community without a fixed notion of outcomes. Projects include films, installations, photographic displays and soundscapes.

Classes such as “sonic ethnography” encourage responses in visceral, sensed experience, to film from their bodies. In the “sensory photography” class they create a silent character portrait. The alertness this awakens is apparent in the brilliant visual world created by JP Sniadecki.

Sniadecki’s work ranges from the semi-hallucinatory *Chinese fairy tale Yumen* to the dazzling simplicity of *People’s Park* co-directed with Libbie Dina Cohn. This 75-minute, single-shot trip through a park in China conjures a whole world reminiscent of “the human realm” in the Buddhist wheel of life. Here is humanity at play – dancing, making music, talking on mobiles. The cinematography traces the textures of life – a jade necklace, a woman tucking in her shirt. Few cinematographers

see whilst moving through space. Peter Mettler or Dvortsevov manage it, and Sniadecki shares this ability as there is a profound understanding of the reason to move in the first place.

Movement is motivated by a questioning eye which finds illumination in the spaces between people. China, as exemplified by this park, seems all about the public space they share and negotiate. The park becomes like a stage, leaving me wondering not just about the individual in China today but also about how we become who we are. The choreography of the camera makes the people seem like fictionalised versions of themselves.

Much of the work made by the Sensory Ethnography Lab comes from the long field study encouraged by anthropology. *Manakamana* is directed by Stephanie Spray, who has spent 15 years living in Nepal, and co-directed by Pacho Velez. *Manakamana* is a deceptively simple film, about a cable car that takes pilgrims up the holy mountain of Manakamana. Out of the darkness of mechanical clunking and voices a woman in a pink sari bursts into being, sitting opposite with a bunch of flowers. For the eight minutes of the journey we see a world pass in her eyes. Musicians, old ladies, small boys, even goats emerge from the dark but we, as much as they, become the subjects. It is reminiscent of Herz Frank’s *10 Minutes Older* in its understanding of the magic of film to shrink time in a shared re-creation of the act of seeing and being seen.

A loose community of self-confessed “recovering” anthropologists, filmmakers, sound artists, all mistrustful of the hegemony of the written word

There are many more masterpieces in the archive of the Lab. *Sweetgrass* by Lucien Castaing Taylor and Ilisa Barbash immerses us in a summer herding of sheep, avoiding nostalgia through a searingly acute presence which “feels” the strains of the physical labour behind this bucolic idyll. Only at the end do we realise this is “the last band of sheep trailed through Montana’s Absaroka-Beartooth mountains” and re-assess what we just saw. It becomes sweeter, sharper, rawer. “What are you going to do now?” the farmer asks John the herder. The question expands beyond the personal to make us wonder at our ever-widening distance from nature.

But these are films made primarily about being – not about meaning. A hinterland of questioning and musing is apparent but does not intrude. Lucien relates how the Lab invites visiting filmmakers such as Leonard Helmlich to show cuts in critiques where they sit in silence as the group discusses their work. The intellectual honesty galvanized by questions combined with such embodied filmmaking has created a movement which challenges us to wake up to our experience – as filmmakers and audiences.

The Lab’s website describes how it “opposes the conventions of visual anthropology that mimic the discursive inclinations of its mother discipline, those of documentary that mimic those of broadcast journalism, and those of art that are not deeply infused with the real”.

The punk child of art and academia which, thankfully, cares little about the conventions of either, seems to be hauling us into a new documentary world. _

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