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Leviathan: An Ethnographic Dream

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Leviathan, *an experimental ethnographic film by Castaing-Taylor and Paravel, is groundbreaking. By decoupling voice from any stable narrative perspective, it allows the viewer to be made over by a world beyond the human. It is, we argue, a form of dreaming—a modality of attention that can open us to the beings with whom we share this fragile planet. As such,* Leviathan *gestures to a sort of ontological poetics and politics for the so-called Anthropocene.* [Anthropocene, dreaming, nonhumans, ontological poetics and politics, sensory ethnography]

Leviathan—a film that ostensibly documents the working lives of New England fishermen—presents us with an inside-out and upside-down world. The very colors of the film are drawn from the interior of a body: the darkness of night and the redness of coursing blood. The light of day never seems to touch the jerking and bobbing ship. The film's images are marked by the surreality of the world. There are red lights and streaks of red and red blood streaming off the side of the ship. There are fishermen, shiny in their plastic raincoats and boots, shiny with sweat as they shuck scallops and shoot the shit. There are fish sloshing back and forth across the deck of the wallowing ship. There are ropes and buckets and nets—and blood and body parts streaming from the ship into the ocean. But there is no central character, no figure—human or animal—upon which to hook the narrative of the film. There are, however, gulls, bright white against the night sky, cawing as they try to keep apace of the ship and its seemingly endless supply of body parts. At one point, those gulls seem to be flying upside down and backwards. Or are we watching them in the ocean's mirror? It is not easy to tell.

Since its release in 2012, *Leviathan* has garnered an extraordinary amount of attention both inside and outside of academia. Hailed simultaneously as a "symbol of a new cinematic experience defying all categorization" (Dequen 2013:26), as "part Rorschach test and part theme park ride" (Keough 2013), and as "a movie without speech that leaves its audience speechless" (Nayman 2013), the film screened widely in film festivals as well as art-house cinemas and has won numerous international awards. But, as Bruno Dequen has pointed out, the film has had a more unexpected result: it has allowed an academic "research laboratory to become the unlikely center of attention for 'la planète cinephile' " (Dequen 2013:26). Both filmmakers are anthropologists who have held prestigious positions in the academy, and both have had an enduring interest in human relations to the nonhuman (see *Foreign Parts*, Paravel and Sniadecki 2012; *Sweetgrass*, Barbash and Castaing-Taylor 2009). Beyond the hoopla about the film, it remains both beautiful and disturbing, or perhaps disturbing in its visceral beauty. The question here is how to come to terms with it as a film that—in and through its terrible beauty—is also cutting-edge anthropology.

One could, perhaps, begin to think *Leviathan* through Lucien Castaing-Taylor's own writing. In Castaing-Taylor's witty and entertaining (as well as thoroughly original) essay "Iconophobia," he chides anthropology for its enduring fear of images, and notes the quasi-religious tenor of the anxiety anthropologists express toward images—as if images, especially images that are not anchored by words, are somehow sinful, or at the very least, morally bankrupt.

In "Iconophobia," Castaing-Taylor calls for a filmic anthropology that would shift away from "the attempt to convey 'anthropological knowledge' on film—the attempt to *linguify* film—to the idea that ethnography can itself be conducted 'filmically' " (Castaing-Taylor 1996:86). The best ethnographic films, Castaing-Taylor seems to be saying, do not just translate written ethnographies into film; they actually exploit the "iconic and affective properties of film" in ways that allow us as viewers to be made over by its content.

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It is not, then, that ethnographic films make entertaining counterparts to ethnographic books—simply presenting the same information in a more engaging and perhaps more accessible way. Good ethnographic films, Castaing-Taylor seems to be saying, may not be providing us with information at all. He asks, "What if film does not *say* but *show*? What if film does not just *describe* but *depict*?" (1996:86). Or as the Armenian filmmaker Artavazd Peleshian puts it: "If it were possible to say it with words, the films would be useless" (in Scott 2013).

What Castaing-Taylor says about ethnographic filmmaking can also apply to discussions *about* ethnographic filmmaking. Is there a way to engage without critique (see Latour 2004)? Our intention is not necessarily to praise—the flipside of critique—but to attempt to enter the logic of filmic depiction itself. What can we learn by allowing ourselves to be made over by *Leviathan*? Moreover, what can we begin to hear? What other voices resonate when voice is decoupled from speech?

To be sure, Castaing-Taylor's latest works may be said to thoroughly resist the temptation to linguify film. Of his previous film *Sweetgrass* (Barbash and Castaing-Taylor 2009), Anthony Lane quipped, "The list of things you won't get from *Sweetgrass* is almost as impressive as the film itself. No narration, though this is a documentary. No music, unless you count a few snatches of song. . .most of them mumbled by an aging fellow on horseback. No way of hearing half the dialogue. No names given for most of the people we meet. No explanatory titles until the end . . ." (Lane 2010). Similarly, of *Leviathan*, A. O. Scott observed that "it offers not information but immersion: 90 minutes of wind, water, grinding machinery and piscine agony" (Scott 2013). *Leviathan* provides us with no anchor. We never know for sure what it is saying, or who or what is speaking, if anyone. The standard filmic "god-trick"—in this case, the one where a god (or the protagonist of the film) would delineate the world as he saw it, and as he hoped we would see it—is foreclosed. We are left open to the world of the film.

In this regard, *Leviathan* marks a filmic break—with ethnographic film in general, as well as with Castaing-Taylor's previous work, *Sweetgrass*, made with Ilisa Barbash. *Sweetgrass* was innovative in its own right (see Russell in this volume for a discussion of these works as experimental ethnography). It shifted ethnographic attention away from a human perspective. This was achieved in a number of ways: in one instance by clever camera placement near a food source that is the object of a sheep herd's attention; and, at another, by an invitation to gaze directly into the eyes of a ewe chewing its cud. And yet, despite this shift away from the human, the sense of the *singularity* of perspective remained; the viewer's positionality was still clearly situated. And in this sense, *Sweetgrass* still appealed to a god-trick, even if the god in question was zoomorphic. If in *Sweetgrass* we succumbed to the narrative lure of the herd coming to a focal point—in ways that might still have had the ability to make us other than human—in *Leviathan*, we simply become unmoored. Thanks to certain tools (such as multiple waterproof GoPro cameras strapped to the heads of fishermen, attached to the sides of the boat, submerged into the ocean's depths), we become resolutely, adamantly *part* of the thickness, the density and the turgidity of a world in which it is very difficult to find our land legs. There are no easy narrative arcs onto which to tether our hopes, or hang our villains, and we are left with a nightmarish juxtaposition of lives, deaths, and things. It is a violent kind of beauty we are bombarded with. Many people report becoming nauseous while watching the film; others panic at the thought of losing their bearings and see the film as nothing more than "an accumulation of often indefinable images" that "proves a strange and unsatisfying endurance test" (Goldstein 2013).

The question seems to have become: without a singular, individual, speaking subject (see Thain in this volume), or even a stable perspective, what can we say about what the film is "saying"? The absence of human speech seems, at times, to bewilder viewers. Some have left *Leviathan* feeling frustrated; others feeling that Castaing-Taylor and Paravel have ignored the one unassailable rule of a committed and engaged anthropology: let your subjects speak for themselves. In refusing to let the "natives" speak, *Leviathan*'s detractors worry, the filmmakers have reduced the political import of a film that could have so much to say about capitalism and class, the environment and the fishing industry. The argument here is familiar: if anthropology is good for nothing else, at the very minimum, it can restore speech to the people it attempts to study.

And yet, in *Leviathan*, it is impossible, even, to make out most of the human dialogues that occur. The

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first voice we hear comes to us, it seems, over a loudspeaker, and it echoes and reverberates until all that a listener can tell is that a human voice is giving an order. Voice as a gesture—here the gesture of a foreman commanding his crew—is severed from the actual content of that command.

The visual images of humans are similarly veiled. We see them through glass, through steam, and in the dark, with blaring artificial lights illuminating their piscine world. In *Leviathan* (with a few significant exceptions), the thing we like doing most when watching an ethnographic film (to gaze at other people speaking and doing things) is itself called into question. We see, but we see through the haze of a nightmare. We see human body parts—hands, arms, legs—before we see whole bodies. Our perspective is constantly shifting with the rise and fall of the boat. We have no fixed vantage point from which to see—or to stand.

We do, however, get glimpses of men working with the body parts of the sea, separating hard shells from soft flesh, separating, with huge scythes, torsos from the wings of a skate. We do see men heaving, twisting, and coiling chains, ropes, and nets; we understand the repetition and the exhaustiveness of the work. We also see the excess, the waste: are those starfish limbs that are drifting limply through the water stained red from blood? The boat that the film tracks is always screaming—metal on metal, motors whirring, a never-ending screech.

In anthropology, we often equate voice with speech—focusing our attention on discourse and to what, precisely, people say. In fact, there are popular software programs that will filter the text of people's stories through coding programs, picking up the repetition of certain words and themes in what precisely was said. In ethnographic film, we apply subtitles with that same religious zeal, hoping somehow to shore up our images and in the process forgetting David MacDougall's admonition that "perhaps the most serious limitation [of subtitles] is that subtitled dialogue tends to make us conceive of films more in terms of what they *say* than in what they *show*" (MacDougall 1998:175). Gone is the sound of the voice, the look in the eye, the twist of the back. Gone is the undercurrent of anger, the waves of sadness. What we miss in our attention to speech, and all too often to the speech of humans, are the monstrous *voices* of our world—voices that are neither fully human, nor animal nor machinic. The film thus challenges what Michel Chion (1999 [1983]:5) calls the vococentrism (the privileging of the *human* voice) in film. Chion argues that "the presence of a human voice structures the sonic space that contains it." *Leviathan*, especially through the work of sound artist Ernst Karel, whose collaboration is crucial to the film's power, works to dissolve such artificial boundaries between human and other voices, allowing us to hear something else.

There is a story by Orhan Pamuk in which he describes a seagull dying on a pebble beach. The dying seagull is a baby. When the dying seagull sees Pamuk, it struggles to get up. Then: "Later, much later, six hours later, when I returned to the pebble beach, the seagull was dead. It had spread one wing as if to fly, and turned on its side, opening one eye as wide as it could to stare blankly at the sun" (Pamuk 2007). Is the seagull in Pamuk's story not speaking with its body? Is the pose it has struck not also a kind of voice? It is a voice that seems to trespass on the border between life and death, now and then. When, instead of being chained to speech, voice is taken as gesture or bodily disposition, a different way of listening comes to the fore. *Leviathan* poses just such a moment. For instance, do we not come to *hear* the decapitated fish head that is being swept off the boat into the ocean turgid with undesirable, unusable animal parts (see figure 9 in the color gallery)? Does its eye not *literally* speak to us as it sloshes back and forth before being carried out to sea? In the same way, the bodies of the fishermen give voice to something more than the terrible indignities of working sleepless shifts doing difficult and repetitive tasks; they also give voice to our shared bodily vulnerability, the way our bodies, like those of the fish, the skate, the starfish, will eventually return to the sea (see figure 13 in the color gallery).

There is, of course, a little rhetorical exaggeration in our argument. In one scene, we do look, and we do clearly see, a human being. The man is sitting in the fishing boat's kitchen, with sandwich materials beside him—mayonnaise, cucumbers, bread—watching the reality TV show *Deadliest Catch* (about offshore fishing). But is he actually watching the show? In fact, he is falling asleep—his eyelids heavy, his chest drowsily rising and falling, he struggles to stay awake but finally succumbs (see figure 16 in the color gallery). Could he be dreaming the film?

And are we, in watching *Leviathan*, not also falling into the vast sea of his dream? What might happen, we want to ask, if we were to allow this *Leviathan*, this sea monster of a movie, to swallow us whole—to dream itself through us? What if we were to delve into its watery depths? Instead of the passage from Job that opens the film, the allusion here would be to the Book of Jonah:

> For Thou didst cast me into the depth,
>
> In the heart of the seas,

> And the flood was round about me;
>
> All Thy waves and Thy billows passed over me; [. . .]
>
> The waters compassed me about, even to the soul.
>
> The deep was round about me;
>
> The weeds were wrapped about my head.
> (Jonah 2:1–6)

What if we were to think of *Leviathan* more like an ethnographic dream than a film—one in which acknowledging the reality of our world means letting go of the sovereign self upon which so much of our critical prowess has heretofore depended? What happens when we allow the depths the film conjures to close in around us? What happens if we accept that our reference points have disappeared? In this terrifying space, what other kinds of attachments to the world become possible? There seems to be a double movement at play in *Leviathan*. The film's multiple cameras dissolve a singular protagonist. As we follow these many cameras and what they see, our singular integrity as a spectator also dissolves. We become submerged and dissipated—we drown—in *Leviathan*'s deeps. In the process, although we are, it seems, robbed of the possibility for empathy (with whom or what can we identify, when we have become thus dissolved?), we gain, perhaps, the possibility for a sort of sympathetic resonance with all of the beings, strange and familiar, that this sea monster envelopes.

If *Leviathan* is a dream, perhaps it is the sort of dream that Kaja Silverman (2009) had in mind in writing *Flesh of My Flesh*. For her, dreaming does not involve the Freudian generation of arbitrary associations, pointing ultimately and only inward to an individual human subject in need of cure. Rather, dream associations are a way of finding resonances with all the other beings beyond us, beings with whom we share the fact of finitude, in ways that take us beyond our limits. Dream associations for Silverman, then, are ontological. Allowing ourselves to dissolve as we trace these connections becomes, then, a form of ethical, or even political, practice in a world that spans beyond the human.

In dreams, we understand volumes without being able to insert the dream words back into a coherent sentence, without even being able to say that a body retains its proper voice. In this ethnographic dream, we become the ocean's dark depths. We are made over by this other world. If the so-called "ontological turn" in anthropology (e.g., Descola 2013; Henare et al. 2007; Kohn 2013; Latour 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2009) is about finding ways to make room for other kinds of realities that we discover ethnographically without domesticating them as human, social, cultural, or linguistic constructions, then *Leviathan* provides a sensorial method for allowing these realities to make us over. It might in this sense be thought of as a kind of ontological poetics (Kohn 2015)—opening us to the terrifying world of other kinds of reality.

This turn, which may seem apolitical to some (Bessire and Bond 2014), is in fact, for others, motivated precisely by the question of how to develop the conceptual resources to envision the kind of politics needed in a world where human and nonhuman futures are increasingly entangled in their mutual uncertainty (Haraway 2008; Kohn 2013; Latour 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2009). *Leviathan*, in the dream-like way it channels the voices from the depths, enters, we believe, this arena of ontological politics. And yet, it prompts us to ask, what form such a politics might take in this space where voice and speech diverge? What if the importance and the politics of this film lie precisely in the dissolution of a self that might be said to "have" something to say in any straightforward way? What if the political generativity of the film actually lies in learning to listen to the myriad voices of the world in which we find ourselves—today, now—voices from which we can no longer (if we want to continue to survive on this planet) claim to separate ourselves based on the facile assertion that we have language, or speech, and they do not? Because who are the "natives" that ought to be allowed to speak in *Leviathan* anyway? Is the film really *about* the category of people we call New England fishermen? Is it possible that through the title's reference to the early modern political thought of Hobbes, the film is also *about* all of us who live, work, and kill under the sovereign rule of capitalism? Politics in the Anthropocene—this time of ours in which humans have become a palpable "force of nature"—may well need something of the monstrous politics to which *Leviathan* seems to gesture, a politics that cannot be reduced to restoring speech to humans but rather one that, as a first step, involves developing an ethnographic attunement to the voices that haunt our world.

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