

The Aesthetics of Vital Materiality in Sensory Ethnography and the Aesthetics of Anthropomorphization in Animated Cinema

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Abstract: *The Harvard Sensory Anthropology Lab produces a series of experimental ethnographic documentaries, in which they hook up a camera, such as a Go pro, to any animal, such as a sheep or a fish, to allow the viewer to become embodied in the animal's point of view in order to realize the anthropological study. Lucien Castaing-Taylor's anthropological documentary on sensory ethnography reinvents the subject of life by utilizing sensory-emphasizing photographic techniques that make all life appear purely visual and material. This aesthetic feature is aesthetically overlapping with the anthropomorphic animations produced by Disney and Pixar, such as Elemental and Zootopia, which incorporate the subjective feelings of the material or the animal in the process of anthropomorphization. Sensory ethnographic documentaries lead us to reflect on the relationship between matter/animals and humans. This paper will compare and analyze the two aesthetic features.*

Keywords: *Ethnographic documentary; Observational documentary; Anthropomorphic animation*

1. Introduction

The Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) from Harvard University has produced a series of experimental ethnographic documentaries in an innovative way. Traditional observational documentaries are considered to be "objective" in that the creator does not intervene in the image, but the very presence of the camera on the set affects the objectivity of the subject. This is what Bill said: "if the camera were not there or how much would differ if the filmmakers presence were more readily acknowledged. That such debate is by its very nature undecidable continues to fuel a certain sense of mystery or disquiet about observational cinema."^[1] To a certain extent, such a discussion is inherently problematic, and the definition of "objectivity" in observational documentary is itself vague and abstract; SEL pinpoints the main problem of observational documentary: the fundamental reason for the inability of documentaries to realize objectivity and authenticity is the presence of human beings. Therefore, instead of adopting the traditional photographic method of shooting from the outside of the subject, SEL uses an alienating method to penetrate into the inside of the subject. SEL's value concept is similar to Dziga Vertov's "kino eyes" theory, where Dziga Vertov believed that the camera should be treated as a dynamic subject similar to the human eye, and that the camera should be regarded as a human "eye" for photography. SEL extends Dziga Vertov's theory by using Go Pro and various portable cameras to fully utilize the potential of the camera from tricky angles, and even make the camera aware like an animal. This paper will analyze two of SEL's documentaries, Sweetgrass and Leviathan, directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor, and will focus on how SEL achieves the "objectivity" and "authenticity" of documentaries through this sensory ethnographic image style. And how Lucien Castaing-Taylor has deconstructed and reconstructed the traditional anthropological documentary through his own sensory ethnographic documentary, and how he has reinvented the subject of "life" by using sensory-emphasizing photography techniques that make all life appear purely visual and material. After discussing the characteristics of sensory ethnography, this paper substitutes the aesthetic characteristics of sensory ethnography into the analysis of anthropomorphic animated films, taking Zootopia and Elemental as the objects of study, exploring the aesthetics of sensory ethnography for the development of anthropomorphic animated films to bring inspiration and commonalities.

2. Multi-sensory image style

The main reason why observational documentaries cannot achieve objectivity is human intervention. No matter how the camera and the creator hide their presence, they still affect the state and authenticity of the subject to a greater or lesser extent. Lucien Castaing-Taylor's strategy is therefore to prevent "human intervention". The "point of view" refers to the point of view from which the film is narrated, and Sweetgrass and Leviathan use creatures, machines, and even the natural world as cameras in order to avoid human intervention, instead of human presence. This creates a "non-human" point of view. In Lucien Castaing-Taylor's debut Sweetgrass, his use of the camera intentionally puts the viewer into the point of view of the sheep in the narrative. As the sheep pass through the forest, director Lucien holds the camera at the height of a sheep and shoots amongst the sheep, with Lucien intentionally comparing the camera to the sheep and simulating the point of view of the sheep. Lucien intentionally likened the camera itself to a sheep and simulated the sheep's point of view. As show in the Figure 1, in this shot, the camera is very shaky, like the subjective experience of sheep being pushed forward in a crowd. In this process, Lucien's photographic images enable us to clearly discover the relationship between individual sheep and the flock. Sheep seem to have no independence in the flock. In a large and dense flock, the movement direction of sheep is completely based on the movement direction of surrounding sheep, and the perspective of sheep is limited. Lucien immerses the viewer in the sheep's point of view to experience how the sheep perceives and reacts in this scene. Although the movie presents only visual and auditory information, Lucien's unique photographic style creates "Synesthesia.", 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. [2] Thus in Lucien's films, the audience seems to become the animal. Although the cinematography in Sweetgrass is still relatively traditional, and is generally shot in an observational documentary style. However, in one of the shots where the grass is being put on the ground as Figure 2, Lucien puts the camera behind the car and films the sheep eating the grass from car's point of view; Lucien is still using a "non-human" point of view, but at this time shifts from the animal perspective to the materialistic machine perspective. In Leviathan, such techniques are further amplified.



Figure 1: Flock on the move.



Figure 2: Feed placement process from a vehicle's point of view

Leviathan's biggest innovation is the use of a sports camera, the Go pro, which allows the camera to be placed in a fixed point-of-view role to complete the shoot, thus completely avoiding "human intervention". The director fixed the Go pro on the seafarer, the bottom of the boat and the fish. In this movie, the most striking scene is the footage taken from the bottom of the boat. The angle of the Go pro depends on the movement of the boat, which floats up and down with the waves, prompting the Go pro to constantly travel up and down between the bottom of the boat and the surface of the sea. In several shots in the movie, Lucien placed the camera on the side of the ship. As the scenes on Figures 3 and 4, the camera starts off below the surface of the sea, the Go pro follows the fast sailing of the ship,

moving forward rapidly on the seabed, stirring up a large number of waves and bubbles, as the ship lifts, the Go pro leaps up from below the surface of the sea, a large number of seagulls flocking densely all over the entire sea level, creating an extremely shocking visual effect. Then the ship sinks again, and some seagulls are swept into the sea by the whirlpool inspired by the hull, and the camera again captures the seagulls fluttering from the bottom of the sea. In this scene, the movie is completely detached from the existence of human beings, thus constitutes a real sense of "non-human" point of view shooting. At the same time, because the entire shooting scene is centered around the "sea", the Go pro seems to be shooting from the point of view of the "sea". This allows audience can perceive the sea world from the "sea" point of view, and realize the multi-sensory image style.



Figure 3: The moment when boat lifts forward.



Figure 4: Seagulls photographed at sea level as the boat falls forward.

3. Material expressions of embodiment

The sensory ethnographic film created by SEL does not just emphasize the visual senses, but extends this visual and auditory sensory experience to the mind and cognition, thus accomplishing an embodiment of the viewing effect. Embodiment is a term in the humanities that refers to the fact that the mind and cognition are closely related to the concrete senses of the body, which is a unified whole of material and psychic sensations that are inextricably intertwined. If the human mind wants to relate to the outside world, it must do so through embodied movement, through the body's senses. In traditional observational documentaries, the camera tries to maintain an objective and neutral shooting angle, so as to keep the subject as much as possible to be "perceived" by the audience in an objective and real state, and then touch the soul. As a result, the style of filming is often characterized by the use of a large number of fixed shots and long lenses, while SEL subverts this convention. Especially in Lucien's two films, Lucien intentionally chose extremely tricky angles to place the camera. Lucien intentionally creates these stunning images to present a powerful audio-visual language that breaks with the viewer's traditional perception. The impactful images are perceived by the viewer's senses as information, and because of the tension of the images, this material sensation quickly reaches the viewer's psyche through embodied movement. Leviathan achieves embodiment primarily through three means: the distortion of images in vision, the de-ordering of camera movement, and the aural sense of presence.

The GoPro aesthetic "is about movements and experience affects, including non-human affects."^[3] In Leviathan, Lucien placed a GoPro on the deck to photograph the dying piles of fish as Figure 5. The GoPro simulated the perspective of the dead fish, following the other dead fish as they swayed on the deck with the water. The GoPro captured a large close-up image at a low angle, with a wide-angle lens. This creates a degree of distortion and warping in the image of the dead fish. Lucien also attached the GoPro to the seafarer's arm to capture the fish being slaughtered from the seafarer's point of view

(Figure 6) . The tension and sensory stimulation of the images create a strong sense of horror and then promote the process of watching the film to form an embodied.

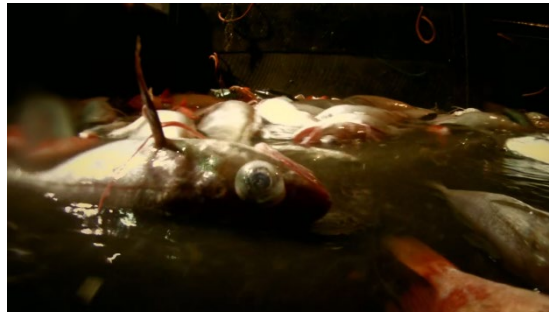


Figure 5: Dead fish on the deck.



Figure 6: Fish being slaughtered.

Part of the visual impact of Leviathan stems from the disordered nature of image movement. In traditional observational documentaries, the camera is held by a human being, and the movement of the camera follows the conventional audiovisual language. In Leviathan, however, the camera's motion scheduling is completely reversed, and the camera's movement is entirely dependent on the movement of nature. Tilted and even inverted camera angles, disorderly camera movements and randomized information all subvert people's stereotypical image of the sea, and really look at the sea from the perspective of nature's interior. For example, in Figures 7 and 8, the GoPro is fixed to the bottom of the boat and follows the up and down movement of the boat without any order, which also leads to the random appearance of the birds. Meanwhile, in the ending sequence, the GoPro is fixed to the mast as the image is shot at an inverted angle, and the direction in which the flock of birds flies and the camera scheduling present a shocking landscape that promotes the viewer to form an embodied experience because of the disorderly nature of the camera scheduling.



Figure 7: Seagulls captured by a camera fixed to the bottom of the boat.



Figure 8: Seagulls captured by a camera fixed to the bottom of the boat.

Leviathan creates tension and excitement through sound, layering and re-editing the audio of the footage, using remixing and synthesizing to create ambient sounds for the viewer. Leviathan's voice carries a strong sense of presence, which combines the ambiance of the scene with the audience's pre-existing experience, thus awakening the audience's real sensory experience in the real world. For example, in a scene of the fishing boat slowly reeling in the nets, the sounds appear to be the sound of water flowing inside the nets, chains turning, voices on the walkie-talkie, conversations between the seafarers, and the muffled operation of the engine. Director intentionally amplified the sound of the chain and the sound of the water flow, and reduced the human voice. "The film thus challenges what Michel Chion calls the vococentrism (the privileging of the *human* voice) in film."^[4] Nature sounds as well as ambient sounds become the focus of the sound, which is more capable of shaping a sense of atmosphere than the human voice. The audience is immersed in this three-dimensional listening environment, which triggers their auditory experience of rainy days and loud machine sounds, thus realizing an embodied movement from the senses to the mind, and stimulating the audience's subjective emotions.

4. Deconstruction and interactive reflection on anthropocentrism

In Lucien Castaing-Taylor's two works, the avoidance of "human intervention" breaks down the boundaries between subject and object in the traditional documentary film of filmmaker-subject, and the creator no longer intervenes in the scene of filming, thus weakening the ideology of the creator in the film, as a critique of creator-centeredness. At the same time, Lucien demonstrates a deconstruction of anthropocentrism in both works. "As a critical posthumanism, trans-corporeality, by insisting on the material inter- and intraconnections between bodies and the substances and flows of the world, denies anthropocentric exceptionalism by considering all species as intermeshed with particular places and larger currents."^[5] This deconstruction of anthropocentricity is manifested in the switching of viewpoints, with Sweetgrass allowing the audience to substitute the viewpoint of a sheep, and Leviathan allowing the audience to substitute the viewpoint of the sea, of a fish, or even of a ship. The avoidance of the human perspective prompts the audience to peer into the complexity and strong tension of the world from another perspective of curiosity, and the narrative discourse shifts from human beings to animals and the natural world, thus completing the deconstruction of anthropocentricity. At the same time, Leviathan shows a critical view of human beings, especially in the shot of killing fish, Lucien lets the GoPro film the dying fish in a very tense way, as well as the gradual dismemberment of the fish by the seafarer's gutting, and the movie shows a lot of fish's severed head and bloody water. Meaningful lives are dismembered into meaningless organ remains, and human desire and greed lead to their disregard and numbness to other life. Leviathan does not focus unilaterally on the inhuman perspective. Lucien also documents the lives of seamen as they calmly shower, eat snacks, and watch television after killing the lives of hundreds of fish. Leviathan presents a theme of the decline of life. After the deconstruction of the meaning of life, life eventually becomes "meaningless". Lucien Castaing-Taylor's work allows the audience to reflect on a series of ecological issues, such as "life" and "nature-humanity", after a strong impact on the senses.

5. The Reinvention and Reflection of Embodiment in Anthropomorphic Animation

Hollywood's animation industry has seen a proliferation of "anthropomorphic" animated films, the most iconic of which is Zootopia(2016), which completely anthropomorphizes animals to create a virtual animal world, and Elemental(2023), which creates a virtual elemental world from the perspective of the elements. There are very strong similarities between the anthropomorphic features, establishment of genres, and thematic expressions of the two films. These animations present the following three prominent aesthetic features.

1) For the simulation of the human world, Zootopia and Elemental two films in the establishment of the role, the structure of interpersonal relations and the construction of the overall worldview, nearly all of the human world is copied in, so that the establishment of the audience to reduce the difficulty of watching the movie. For example, in Figure 9, when Judy comes to the Zootopia, a large wide-angle panorama is shot at this time to show the bustle of the big city. Such scenes are very capable of guiding our audience's empathy and identification. Moreover, the character's personality is also strongly anthropomorphized, (Figure 10) which will make the audience quickly accept the world setting of the movie.



Figure 9: Judy arrives in Zootopia for the first time.



Figure 10: Anthropomorphic animals in the Zootopia film.

2) The embodied expression of ontology. This is very similar to Lucien Castaing-Taylor's aesthetic characterization of sensory ethnography. Both anthropomorphic animation and sensory ethnography need to challenge human beings' original perspectives of observation, and only in this way can human beings truly produce an embodied understanding of an animal, or element. Both films mostly take the perspective of actually substituting for a specific object. This is even more evident in *Elemental*, where Ember Lumen is chasing Wade Ripple when they squeeze into a narrow crack in the wall. At this time, both of them are squeezed into a monstrous flat position due to the elemental characteristics of fire and water, and this action design creates an "embodied" sensory experience for the viewer (Figure 11, Figure 12).

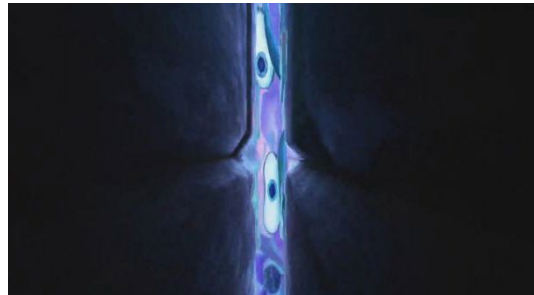


Figure 11: Wade Ripple in wall joint.

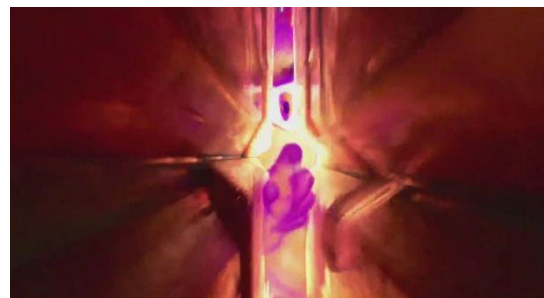


Figure 12: Ember Lumen in wall joint.

3) Challenges to anthropocentrism. Both anthropomorphic animated films and ethnographic documentaries manifest a deconstruction of anthropocentrism. "The very idea of the "animal" as a homogeneous entity opposed to the human, has been critiqued by Jacques Derrida as an act of first-degree criminality against the diverse members of the non-human world. Such an act has often been associated with anthropo-denial, or the tendency to refuse complex forms of thinking, emotions, or affective states to non-human creatures, in an attempt to highlight their inherent inferiority."^[6] *Zootopia* translates man's claim to "uniqueness" into a trap and subversion of carnivores by herbivores. In *Zootopia*, some of the carnivores suddenly and unconsciously attack other animals, which triggers the herbivores' discrimination against the carnivores for their "bestiality" and "savagery"

(Figure 13). The "bestiality" and "savagery" of carnivores are considered to be irrational characteristics. Here the herbivore is like the human being in anthropocentrism, refusing to recognize the complexity of the other's thinking and rationality, and considering them to be beasts ready to explode with their bestiality, in order to complete the discipline of the other and consolidate their own power.



Figure 13: A mindless carnivore try to attack Judy and Nick.

6. Conclusion

Lucien Castaing-Taylor implements the theoretical perspective of sensory ethnography in both works. At the same time, Lucien Castaing-Taylor has a clear creative logic. "Multi-sensory" is the core aesthetics of Lucien's works. Through "non-human point of view" shooting, the impactful visual images create "embodied", completing a multi-dimensional impact on the audience from the senses to the mind, allowing the audience to reflect on the anthropocentric argument. With the rise of environmentalism and carbon-neutral rationality, more and more creators of animated films have begun to reflect on anthropocentrism, placing the subject of creation on animals, elements and even cells. This alternative narrative subject can provide richer and more diversified content, constantly challenging and criticizing a series of human behaviors, and triggering the audience's reflection on ecology and nature.

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