Negative capability and the flux of life: films of the Sensory Ethnography Lab

SINCE its establishment in 2006, the Sensory Ethnography Lab at the University of Harvard (henceforth the SEL) has been responsible for an impressive series of innovative and technically accomplished films, a number of which have vaulted the frontiers of academia and been widely distributed through festivals and even general cinema release, mostly to critical acclaim in the mass media. At the same time, these films have contributed to a lively debate within academia about the very nature of ethnographic film-making and, indeed, of ethnography more generally. Furthermore, their work is constantly evolving and diversifying, making any generalisation perilous. As with this book as a whole, the time frame of this chapter pertains only up until 2015, and their most recent work will most probably require some further refinement of the arguments and analyses presented here. But with these caveats, certain general characteristics can be discerned. One thing is certainly clear: although the films of the SEL have been described as ‘observational’, and with good reason, they are very different in terms of their underlying praxis to the films of Observational Cinema.¹

The first part of this chapter is concerned with the general ideas and influences that inform the praxis of the SEL and with the films that first established its reputation, which were made through the joint endeavours of Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Ilisa Barbash and Ernst Karel. In the latter part, I consider some more recent works, including the films made by those who might be called the ‘second wave’ of SEL film-makers, that is, those who were involved at some point in the media training courses that have been offered through the departments of Anthropology and of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard since 2006. These film-makers include Véréna Paravel, John Paul ‘J. P.’ Sniadecki and Stephanie Spray.

As I describe, the film-making praxis of the SEL has been moving progressively away from a conception of ethnography that is in tune with the one on which this book is based. While this movement has not been without its twists and turns, and some doubling back, there can be no doubt about the general direction of travel.

FOUNDATIONS AND INFLUENCES

The SEL was initially set up at Harvard as a collaborative venture between the Department of Anthropology and the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies. On the home page of its website, it describes itself as ‘an experimental laboratory that promotes innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography’. In addition to film, it is also involved in the production of still photography, sound recordings and installations, though in this chapter I shall be concerned exclusively with the SEL’s film productions.

The founding director of the SEL was Lucien Castaing-Taylor and he continues to act as its director to this day. Castaing-Taylor, who is British, studied anthropology as an undergraduate at the University of Cambridge and later joined the doctoral programme at the University of California, Berkeley. As a film-maker, his initial training was on the documentary film production course offered by Center for Visual Anthropology at the University of Southern California (USC). Although a number of others have made major and very important contributions to the work of the SEL, Castaing-Taylor has played the predominant role in determining its overall orientation, both by personal example as a film-maker, and also as a teacher on the various postgraduate media training programmes offered at Harvard. In many ways, the SEL could be seen as the institutional embodiment of an intellectual and creative agenda that Castaing-Taylor first laid out in embryonic form as far back as a series of publications that appeared in the 1990s, some years before he arrived at Harvard.²

In addition to his position at the SEL, Castaing-Taylor has also been the Director (later joined as co-Director by the film-maker and historian of science, Peter L. Galison) and previously the Associate Director, of the Film Study Center, since 2002. This body was first set up in 1957 to support the production of non-fiction films, initially under the wing of Harvard’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, though in 1964, it transferred to the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts. Although the Film Study Center is now independent of the Carpenter Center, the two bodies continue to collaborate. The first film to be produced through the Film Study Center was John Marshall’s work, *The Hunters* (1957), while the first director was Robert Gardner, who continued in this position for forty years, until 1997. His films, *Dead Birds* (1963) and *Forest of Bliss* (1985) were also produced with the assistance of the Center.³ Today, as described on its website, the Center aims to support a broad range of audiovisual creative practice, ‘from the ethnographic to the experimental’, with a continuing emphasis on non-fiction films but now also including other media and installations. The Center has supported the production of many of the best-known SEL works, as well as works by independent non-fiction film-makers associated with Harvard in one way or another.⁴

Another important influence on the praxis of the SEL has been Ernst Karel, a sonic ethnographer and sound artist who holds a PhD in anthropology from the University of Chicago. Until 2017, Karel held the post of manager of the SEL, while simultaneously being the assistant director of the Film Study Center and a teacher on the practical media training programmes. As well as producing his own acoustic works, which have ranged from sonic ethnographies to more abstract compositional works, Karel has contributed to almost all the major films produced by the SEL, be it as sound recordist, sound editor or sound designer, or some combination of all three roles. In conjunction with the high standards of cinematography that generally characterise SEL films, their distinctively sensorial quality can in large part be attributed to the complex and layered soundtracks created for them by Karel. Indeed, as the screen studies scholar, Scott MacDonald has observed, Karel's 'contributions to this body of work would be difficult to overestimate'.⁵

Although the film-makers associated with the SEL have mostly come from anthropology or social science backgrounds themselves, through the Film Study Center, as well as through the Harvard Film Archive, located in the Carpenter Center, they have been engaged in an active dialogue with film-makers from a range of very different backgrounds.⁶ As a result, the SEL film-making praxis has been much influenced by non-fiction film-making approaches lying well outside conventional ethnographic film traditions. Among the film-makers whose work has been particularly influential, Castaing-Taylor himself identifies Jana Sevcikova, Pedro Costa, Sergei Dvortsevoy and Artavazd Peleghian.⁷

Another important influence appears to have been films in a tradition of North American avant-garde formalist film-making, sometimes referred to as 'structural' film-making, as represented, for example, by the work of Peter Hutton, James Benning and Sharon Lockhart, all of whom have been visitors to Harvard over the years. Of the film-makers working in this tradition, the one who seems to have had the closest ties is Lockhart, who has not only shown her work regularly at the Film Study Center and the Film Archive, but has also worked directly with students enrolled on the media training programmes on a practical project. In addition, a number of her films have been produced with the assistance of the Film Study Center, or Studio7Arts, the production company that Robert Gardner set up towards the end of his life. Certainly, once one is familiar with Lockhart's work, it becomes much easier to appreciate what at least some SEL film-makers have been aiming to achieve.

Lockhart's films are typically constructed around a series of prolonged shots taken from a single static position (normally of at least five minutes, often much longer). The soundtracks usually consist simply of synch sounds: although these may include dialogue, it is rarely comprehensible. Most of her films show people apparently going about their business regardless of the camera, though in fact their movements have often been carefully

prepared and even choreographed by Lockhart, so that, in effect, their action on screen is more in the nature of a performance than an example of their normal everyday behaviour. A number of her films have been shot in exotic locations and she usually undertakes a period of research prior to shooting. Probably for these reasons, her work has been described on occasion, both by herself and by art film commentators, as 'ethnographic', though when judged by the criteria for the definition of that term proposed in this book, their ethnographicness is, at best, limited.⁸

SEL film-makers have also been influenced by certain philosophical ideas, which are signalled by a number of key terms that crop up regularly in their writings and interviews. Particularly important are the allusions to 'aesthetics', as in the mission statement on the SEL website cited above. This is a reference, not to anything exclusively to do with fine arts, as one might think, but rather to the use of this term by the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey to refer to any form of experiential engagement with the world that effects a transition from a state of disorder to a state of harmony. As such, it is applicable to everyday technical processes and relationships with the environment, as well as to all manner of art forms, from the most elitist to the most popular.

Also prominent in SEL discourse are references to the 'flux of life', 'life-worlds', 'lived experience', 'the magnitude of human existence' and other similar phrases, all of which are allusions to the ideas of philosophers in the phenomenological tradition, particularly Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Another author alluded to in SEL commentaries is the post-structuralist Jean-François Lyotard, notably in relation to his analysis of the way in which discursive modes of representation seek to control the more unruly but fuller figurative modes. Regardless of their precise intellectual origin, however, all these allusions are usually invoked by SEL film-makers for the same general purpose, namely, to assert the importance of corporeal experience as a mode of human engagement with the world, and thereby to underwrite the relative neglect of discursive language in SEL films in favour of more sensorial material.

Whether these philosophical thinkers were all quite so convinced of the limits of language as a means of mediating human relationships with the world as some SEL film-makers appear to believe is debatable: after all, Heidegger famously observed that 'Language is the House of Being. In its house, man dwells.'⁹ However, it is not my concern here to contest the validity of these philosophical ideas, nor their application to ethnographic film-making, but rather to identify in pragmatic operational terms the nature of SEL film-making praxis.

In this regard, one can draw a number of instructive parallels between the work of the SEL film-makers and their institutional forebear, Robert Gardner. The most significant of these concerns the role of dialogue. As

with Gardner's work, there is typically little emphasis on dialogue in SEL films. In some of their films, there is a limited amount of dialogue between subjects, while in others, there is a similarly limited amount of dialogue between subjects and film-makers. But there is nothing like the pronounced emphasis on 'conversation' such as one finds in Observational Cinema.¹⁰

This relative lack of interest in dialogue is related to another point of comparison between the praxes of Gardner and the SEL, namely the degree to which they are participatory and reflexive. As Gardner readily acknowledged, although he was concerned to provide an accurate account of the life-worlds that he presented in his films, he was more interested in what those worlds meant to him, philosophically or artistically, than in what they meant to the people who actually lived them. As a corollary, one rarely hears the subjects' voices in his films, nor do we ever hear his own voice enquiring about their views of the world, or exploring how their practices might relate to their general cultural ideas or their networks of social relationships. In SEL films, while we do sometimes get to hear the film-makers' voices in dialogue with the subjects, the content of these dialogues is often rather trivial and related to the immediate circumstances of filming itself rather than to the making of connections between what the film is showing the subjects doing and more general features of their worldview or social and political circumstances. On the whole then, SEL films are not very much more reflexive and participatory than those of Gardner.

This lack of emphasis on verbal exchange is not, however, associated with a lack of interest among SEL film-makers in sound more generally. On the contrary, SEL films usually feature soundtracks that have been most intensively fashioned, often by Ernst Karel. Here one may draw a direct parallel between the vital role that Karel has played in the making of SEL films and the similarly important role that the sound editor Michel Chalufour played in many of Gardner's major films. Where there is a difference is in the editing of the picture track. In general, SEL film-makers do not make use of dense metaphorical associations between adjacent shots or sequences to communicate their meanings, certainly not to anything like the degree to which Gardner deployed these associations in *Forest of Bliss*, as described at length in Chapter 9.

One can also draw a more personal comparison between Gardner and Castaing-Taylor. Having once been enthusiastic advocates for the use of film within the discipline of anthropology, both subsequently became disillusioned with the academic world. In recent interviews, Castaing-Taylor has taken to describing himself as a 'recovering anthropologist', who still might preface his work as a film-maker on a particular project with a period of first-hand familiarisation, in the manner of classical participant-observation fieldwork, but who otherwise actively seeks to remain as ignorant as possible of the subject matter, for fear of 'polluting' his own apperceptions with any previous literature or previous way of dealing with the subject.¹¹

Castaing-Taylor also now regularly disclaims, with admirable candour, any interest in clarifying or explaining, or indeed ‘saying’ anything, since for him, this would involve an unacceptable reduction of the inherent ambiguity of the world. Instead, he suggests that the SEL, as a collective endeavour, should be more invested in what the early-nineteenth-century Romantic poet, John Keats called ‘negative capability’, that is, the capacity to be ‘in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’. But while it would certainly be inspiring to feel that one’s work is based on the same principles as that of William Shakespeare – cited by Keats in the same passage as the supreme exponent of ‘negative capability’ – it is difficult to see how this frank disclaimer of any interest in fact or reason is compatible with the general project of ethnography as this is understood by most of its contemporary academic practitioners.

BEYOND ACADEMIA: *SWEETGRASS* AS THE PIONEER WORK OF THE SEL

The film that first drew attention to the work of the SEL beyond the realms of academia, and in spectacular fashion, was *Sweetgrass*, a feature-length film about the life of a group of sheep herders working for a small family business in Big Timber, a small town in southern Montana, just north of Yellowstone Park. This film was co-directed by Ilisa Barbash and Castaing-Taylor. Although it was not released until 2009, the main bulk of the shooting took place between 2001 and 2003 when the film-makers were still teaching anthropology at the University of Colorado Boulder. During this period, both spent prolonged periods of fieldwork in Big Timber.¹²

In total, they shot around 200 hours of footage, which were reduced to no more than 101 minutes in the final film (i.e. involving a cutting ratio of 120:1, which even in the video era is really extraordinarily high). In addition, accompanying the DVD version, at least as released in the UK, there are ten short Bonus Films, totalling around 55 minutes, which provide an interesting complement to the main film. Starting in 2007, eight further films were produced for display as an installation under the collective title, *Sheep Rushes*: six of these films offer more extended versions of material included in the main film, but two are unique to the installation. With a total running time of almost 80 minutes, these eight films also complement the main film but are interesting in their own right, and I shall therefore discuss them in a separate section.

In terms of its general narrative shape, *Sweetgrass* is based on a conventional ‘as if’ chronology: material shot over two or three years was reordered in the edit suite to suggest a chronology of a number of consecutive months within a single year, running from late winter through to the autumn.

15.1 *Sweetgrass* (2009). Left, Pat Connolly complains to his mother by mobile phone about life on the high plains. Right, at the end of the trail, John Ahern moves on to an uncertain future.

The film begins with a pre-title sequence of establishment shots of the landscape dusted with snow. This is followed by the title inserted in among various extended shots of the sheep, before the film plunges abruptly into the noisy and claustrophobic confines of a shearing trailer. Here, one is immediately struck by the deft but seemingly uncaring way in which the shearers handle the animals, as if they were mere objects on a production line, which, in a sense, they are – this is a business after all. Spring then follows and the sheep herders are shown being equally brusque in their handling of new-born lambs.

Around twenty-five minutes into the film, the tone changes decisively as a vast flock of three thousand sheep is driven along the main street of Big Timber and up into the high plains of the nearby Absaroka-Beartooth mountain range, where they will spend the summer. Here, amid the stunning natural beauty of the peaks and a stream of Western movie tropes, the film comes to revolve around two male characters with very contrasting attitudes to the animals, as we discover through the radio microphones that they are wearing. The older of the two, the much-wrinkled John Ahern, sings to the sheep and addresses them as ‘my girls’, while the other, Pat Connolly, who is deeply disillusioned with life on the trail, more often curses them roundly. After following the day-to-day activities of Ahern and Connolly as they herd the sheep, scare off night-time grizzlies and other predators, and engage in desultory conversations in and around their cook tent, the summer period culminates in a classical crisis scene in which Connolly takes himself up to a high point and uses his mobile phone to unburden himself of all his woes to his mother (figure 15.1, left).

This scene is much commented upon in reviews of the film, since its whining tone clashes almost comically with the epic grandeur of the surroundings, as well as with the trope of the resilient Marlboro Man. The film then moves into valedictory mode as the sheep are herded back down the mountain in clouds of dust to the stockyards at Big Timber. Finally, in

15.2 *Sweetgrass* (2009). Left, a ‘bellwether’ ewe, the only creature, human or ovine, to look intently down the barrel of the camera. Right, the sheep are herded through the forest on the way to the high plains.

a memorable concluding shot, like a drifter in a Steinbeck novel, we see Ahern as a passenger in a pick-up truck, as sparing as ever with words and pulling on his smoke, on the road again, moving on to some unknown, uncertain destination (figure 15.1, right).

The cinematography on *Sweetgrass*, performed by Castaing-Taylor, is highly accomplished. So too is the sound recording, which involved the use of up to eight radio mikes, attached to animals as well as people. In the end credits, Castaing-Taylor is described merely as the person who ‘recorded’ the material, but this modest title belies the highly considered visual style that informs the way in which the material has been shot. Most takes are long, often in wide-angle, with close-ups, zooms, even mid-shots being a relative rarity. There are, however, some notable exceptions, including the zoomed-in close-up among the establishing shots of the pre-title sequence of a ‘bellwether’ ewe, that is, an animal that has been given a bell on account of its tendency to be a leader of the flock. This sheep looks unflinchingly down the barrel of the camera lens, the only subject, human or ovine, to do so in the course of the entire film (figure 15.2, left).

Again with a few exceptions, the material is shot from an unprivileged perspective – one that would be available to someone participating normally in the events portrayed. While some of the wide shots appear to have been taken from a tripod, notably the slow pans across the mountain scenery, most are hand-held, or more strictly speaking harness-held, since throughout the shoot, Castaing-Taylor wore a harness from which he could suspend the camera in order to keep his hands free for assisting the sheep herders or riding his horse. While he was shooting he made it clear to the subjects that he did not wish to engage in conversation, with the result that while there are a number of casual references to him, at no point does a human subject ever directly address or even look at the camera. When he was not shooting, however, Castaing-Taylor reports that he was often involved in animated discussion with his subjects.

Once they had completed the editing, Barbash and Castaing-Taylor took the financially bold decision to copy the film – originally shot on relatively low quality NTSC video – onto 35 mm stock, and in this form they sent it around international festivals. After a slow start, including rejection by many specifically ethnographic film festivals, resounding success at more general major film festivals led to international theatrical distribution and eventually to the garnering of a host of highly enthusiastic reviews from even the most hard-nosed of the US feature film commentariat.¹³ Almost all expressed their simultaneous surprise and joy at the discovery that men for all the world like the cowboys of the Old West should still be living at this hour, though, in a heart-rending punctum reserved to an intertitle right at the end of the final credits, it is revealed that after more than a century of operation, the family farm at the heart of the film had closed down in 2004, the year after filming had been completed. In effect, this brought all sheep herding in the Absaroka-Beartooth mountains to an end.

Whether the film is equally successful from a specifically ethnographic point of view, and if so, in what sense, clearly depends crucially on how one defines ethnography itself. In interviews, the film-makers have spoken of their concern to give as much attention to the sheep as to the human subjects in the film, often referring to the long history of human-ovine symbiosis stretching back to the Neolithic era. In cutting the film, they explain, they sought to establish the sheep both as a collectivity and as individuals (as in the form of the bellwether ewe), even before introducing the people, who, for the first twenty minutes of the film are shown communicating only with the sheep (and one or two dogs). On account of this prominence of the sheep, particularly in the early part of the film, some reviewers have suggested that the film should be considered an important contribution to the current interest in multispecies ethnography.

Sweetgrass undoubtedly offers a fine and detailed ethnographic description of certain aspects of the life of Montana sheep herders while at the same time affording a strong sense of ‘being there’ among a sea of sheep and the vastness of the Absaroka-Beartooth mountains (figure 15.2, right). But if one seeks to go beyond merely descriptive ethnographicness, this requires more than just the evocation of ‘lived experience’, even if it is powerfully and effectively achieved, as in this case. It also requires, as I have argued at various points in this book, the establishment of connections between the practices of ‘lived experience’ with the ideas and social relations that sustain the ‘life-world’ that is portrayed on the screen. In *Sweetgrass*, these connections are certainly present but they remain in the background.

However, it is these connections that inform most of what we see on the screen, including the interspecific relationships between human beings and sheep. For, contrary to what some of the film-makers’ remarks in

interviews seem to imply, what we are witnessing in *Sweetgrass* is not some kind of generic encounter of humanity and sheep that has been going on since prehistory, but rather the operation of a small family business which is, moreover, on the point of economic collapse due to the concatenation of a series of historically specific circumstances, including the general reduction in the consumption of lamb in the USA as a whole and other, more local factors to do with grazing permits in national parks. Arguably, it is this set of circumstances, more than any other, that impacts on the manner in which the characters in the film relate to the practice of sheep herding and, by extension, on the manner in which they relate to the animals.

While Castaing-Taylor was trailing in the mountains, Barbash remained in Big Timber, and shot scenes of life in and around the town, including rodeos, shooting competitions, even political meetings. But when cutting the film, they decided to leave all this material out of the film and focus instead on what one might term the 'front-line' of sheepherding. Clearly, this was an entirely legitimate choice and it certainly seems likely that to have burdened the film with all this additional information would have been to its detriment as a cinematic spectacle. But this decision also limited the complexity of the ethnographic account that the film could offer.

On the other hand, a good sense of the broader context of ideas and relations underpinning the world represented in *Sweetgrass* is offered in the Bonus Films that feature on the DVD as well as in the film-makers' voice-over commentary that is one of the audio options for playback. The Bonus Films cover the other end, so to speak, of a number of the processes that we see in the main film, including the insemination of the ewes, and the marshalling and weighing of sheep before they are sent off to market. More importantly, in following these processes, we are made aware of the importance of family relations to the way in which this sheepherding business is conducted, and in particular of the centrality of Lawrence Allestad, the ranch owner and paterfamilias, and by the film-makers' own account, a man to be reckoned with. In the main film, however, although he appears at various crucial points, he is not identified. Also clearly important are his wife Elaine and various other relatives, including their son Billy, but they too only have anonymous walk-on parts in *Sweetgrass* itself.

It also transpires that the principal characters, Ahern and Connolly, are cousins, while the young teenagers who help drive the sheep up through the forest are Connolly's niece and nephew. Many other people, including women, old men and even children, all seem to be involved in the business of sheepherding at one point or another. We discover that the ethnicity of the Allestads as 'Wegians' (i.e. descendants of Norwegian immigrants), is important to them and serves to distinguish them from Connolly and Ahern, their hired hands, who are 'Irish'. The men doing the shearing, on the other

hand, belong to neither group, but are a specialist gang who move from farm to farm with their trailer, and come from much further afield, even as far as New Zealand. As time is money for them, they are anxious to despatch the shearing of the lambs as expeditiously as possible, and as they do it all the time they have become highly efficient at this work.

Another aspect that comes across in these additional materials is how many skills are involved the practice of sheepherding. Early on in the main film, a young man – whom we discover from the film-makers' voice-over is Billy Allestad – tells a joke about a man who goes to buy himself a new brain only to discover, to his surprise, that a cowboy brain is much more expensive than that of a lawyer or a banker because, as the punchline has it, 'it has never been used'. The main film itself does little to contradict the old adage that many a true word is spoken in jest; for while we do get a sense of the skilled nature of the sheepherders' practices in the birthing scene in which they are trying to get ewes to adopt motherless lambs, once we are up in the mountains, over the radio microphones we get a great deal of ugly invective from Connolly and many charmingly mumbled cowboy songs from Ahern, but only a limited sense of the skills that the two of them must have had to deploy in managing a vast flock of sheep vulnerable to predators over several months. We see them shooting ineffectively at grizzlies, but it is only from the additional materials that we learn that they are missing the bears on purpose, and shooting only to scare them because, owing to the federal regulations regarding 'wilderness' areas, they would be heavily fined and could even be sent to gaol if they actually killed a bear.

There is also a marked difference in the language used by Connolly and Ahern in the additional materials, compared to their speech in the main film. *In the Cook Tent*, one of the Bonus Films, shows that, on occasion at least, they could be very articulate. After a couple of preliminary shots, this 8-minute film consists of a single shot taken looking in from the front of the tent, with Connolly in the foreground and Ahern beyond. There is an almost identical shot in the main film, obviously taken at the same time, in which both men are silent and impassive, conforming to the Western movie trope of the cowboy as a man of few words. However, in *In the Cook Tent*, they talk in a lively manner about a number of legendary local characters, including Roy Connolly, Pat's grandfather, who was often on the wrong side of the law on account of his predilection for horse-rustling, but who was also both an accomplished and a cunning horseman, who knew how to handle himself at rodeos. This then leads on to a general discussion of horsemanship skills. In contrast to the material presented in the main film, as he tells these stories Connolly often looks across to Castaing-Taylor behind the camera to include him in the discussion through eye contact, even if not verbally.

As *In the Cook Tent* shows, the shearherders' experience of the 'life-world' presented in *Sweetgrass* consists not just of corporeal practices related to shearherding but is also heavily invested with other ideas, memories and values that are only accessible to third parties through language. Moreover, these ideas relate not just to social relations, but also to the environment and to animals, a point made obliquely in two other Bonus films, in which Connolly, Billy and Lawrence Allestad, and another man talk, first about elk hunting and then about their relationships with dogs. A multispecies ethnography that does not embrace this intellectual and cultural dimension of the relationship between species can only ever be partial.

Clearly, no ethnographic film can cover everything and *Sweetgrass* does what it does with great conviction, to paraphrase Flaherty's celebrated dictum cited in the Introduction to this part of the book. In a sense, the Bonus Films and the film-makers' voice-over commentary serve something of the same contextualising function as the 'study guide' so piously and routinely called for by proponents of ethnographic film over the years, and so rarely produced in practice. When taken together with the main film, these additional materials certainly greatly increase the complexity of the audiovisual ethnographic account that Barbash and Castaing-Taylor offer of the last days of shearherding in Montana at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Even when taken on its own, without the Bonus Films, *Sweetgrass* offers a richly descriptive account of certain aspects of this shearherding life that can be appreciated in much the same way that one might appreciate *The Hunters* as an account of San hunting practices in the 1950s. It may be that it offers only a partial account, marked by certain selective exclusions. But this does not prevent one from admiring *Sweetgrass* as an extremely well made film that is clearly firmly anchored in the relationship of trust built up by film-makers over the course of their long-term commitment to the community where it was produced.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM AS GALLERY INSTALLATION: *SHEEP RUSHES*

Although *Sweetgrass* was of crucial importance in establishing the reputation of the SEL, perhaps the best indicator of its future direction was not *Sweetgrass* itself, but rather *Sheep Rushes*, the suite of eight much shorter films that were edited from the same body of rushes. These were not intended for screening in a cinema or lecture hall, but rather for presentation in an art gallery in the manner of an installation. The first such presentation occurred in 2007, some two years before the completion of *Sweetgrass*, and involved

only three of the films. Subsequent gallery presentations have involved various combinations of the films up to and including all eight of them. In contrast to *Sweetgrass*, Lucien Castaing-Taylor is generally identified as the sole director of *Sheep Rushes*, though Ilisa Barbash continues to be credited as the producer, while Ernst Karel acted as sound editor, as in the longer film.¹⁴

Apart from the first film, *Hell Roaring Creek*, which is almost twenty minutes in duration, all the films in the *Sheep Rushes* suite are between 5 and 12 minutes long, each offering a vignette of a certain aspect of the sheepherders' life. Again with the exception of *Hell Roaring Creek* as well as one other shorter film, *Bedding Down*, which are unique to *Sheep Rushes*, there is considerable overlap between these installation films and the material that appears in *Sweetgrass*. This overlap is greater in some films than in others, but as a general rule, a given situation is represented at greater length in the *Sheep Rushes* version.

In sharp contrast to *Sweetgrass*, however, though some of the films have a certain internal narrative structure, there is no attempt to insert the films as a group into any sort of overarching narrative arc. In the accompanying textual catalogues, the *Sheep Rushes* films are generally presented in the chronological order in which they were shot, with the shearing and lambing coming after the grazing on the high plains, as they did in reality. But when the films are presented in an art gallery, visitors are not required to view them in any prescribed order. Instead, each individual film is presented on a loop and visitors are free to enter and leave as they please, at any point.

The image track of most of the *Sheep Rushes* films features long takes and minimal editing, legitimating the slightly ironic title in the sense that they approximate – though in fact still remain far from – unedited film rushes. The soundtrack, on the other hand, has been extensively edited by Karel and is rich, multilayered and distributed over five channels. Indeed, Castaing-Taylor has commented that he considers these films to be 'audiovideos', works that are more sound pieces than image pieces. This combination of highly observational camerawork and enhanced soundtracks invites an intense visual and acoustic engagement with the material in order, it would seem, to provoke thoughts that are not confined to the parochial world of Big Timber but are of a rather more general philosophical, even existential order.

This is certainly suggested by *Geworfen*, the alternative title given to the last film in the suite and the main title of which is *Into-the-Jug*. This film, which is 11 minutes long, consists of a series of extended shots showing the birthing of lambs in the 'jugs', the small wooden pens about 5 ft × 5 ft within the lambing shed at the Allestad ranch. With ruthless proximity, the camera shows the lambs being laboriously dragged out of their mothers'

bodies and then literally thrown onto the upturned lid of a plastic dustbin along with some other lambs, in a bloody, shapeless pile, still covered in amniotic fluid. There is some banter between the man who is doing the birthing (Lawrence Allestad, as we know from the Bonus Films) and one or more off-screen third parties, but this is not particularly significant. One of these shots appears in the main film, but in being shown here in combination with a number of others on the same subject, and in isolation from any other material, it has much greater impact. The image of the biological process, in combination with the apparent indifference of the shepherders to the fact that they are dealing with sentient beings, will surely be unsettling for some viewers.

While the hyphens in the main title offer a clue, it is *Geworfen*, the alternative title, which suggests that this film should not be understood merely as a descriptive account of the shepherders of Big Timber treating their animals with a ruthless pragmatism, but rather that the lambs' experience as shown in the film may also serve as a metaphor for the *human* condition. For *Geworfen* would appear to be a play on words, albeit one that is highly recondite: in the simplest sense, this title consists merely of the past participle of the German verb *werfen*, which literally means to throw or to drop, but is also used to describe the giving of birth by animals; however, *Geworfen* is also a reference to a key concept of Heideggerian philosophy, *Geworfenheit*, usually translated into English as 'thrownness'. This concept encapsulates the Heideggerian idea that human beings are arbitrarily 'thrown' at birth into a Being-in-the-World (just as lambs are thrown, similarly hyphenated, 'Into-the-Jug') that is constrained and paradoxical, primarily because it is finite.

Although I suspect that there is considerable irony at play here, this reading of the transcendent in the ethnographically particular is reminiscent of Robert Gardner's much-cited observation regarding the making of *Dead Birds* – that he was less interested in the Dani themselves than in the opportunity that the making of a film about their warfare afforded for addressing the issue of human mortality, or as he put it, 'how we all, as humans, meet our animal fate'.¹⁵ Similarly, it seems that through *Into-the-Jug* (*Geworfen*), we are being invited to think of how we meet our animal fate when we are born.

But if *Sheep Rushes* is reminiscent in some senses of Gardner's work in terms of its ultimate philosophical objectives, in terms of the practical film-making, this suite of films is more directly reminiscent of the work of the North American 'structural' film-makers. This is particularly true of *Hell Roaring Creek*, which being the first and most substantial film of the suite, is therefore of interest to describe here at some length.

After a simple white-on-black title that disappears after a few seconds, the film begins with a black screen underlain by the intense sound of the

water running over stones, gurgling loudly. After what seems like an eternal 45 seconds, the image finally cuts in abruptly to reveal a wide shot taken in the thin light of dawn, from a low, static position, right in the middle of the eponymous creek, with the water rushing towards the camera. Initially, there is nothing to observe other than the water and a screen of conifers with some mountain slopes in the background, nor anything to hear other than the roaring sound of the water. But then there are a few bleats and a sheepherder emerges in the semi-darkness on the right-hand bank, with some sheep and dogs milling about.

This continues for a full five minutes, before the sheepherder finally crosses the stream on foot and after some hesitation, a few sheep follow. This encourages other sheep, until soon there is an almost unbroken stream of sheep crossing the creek from right to left, at right angles to the creek itself. The stream gradually becomes a flood and continues unabated for most of the remaining 15 minutes of the film, as the light gradually increases: the younger sheep leap and skip across, the larger and older ones proceed cautiously, some move in groups, others go it alone. There are two thirty-second breaks in the image – one about a third of the way into the film, the other at about two-thirds. These are the occasion for some minor adjustments in framing and exposure but the sound of the roaring water continues unbroken across both breaks.

The overall effect of *Hell Roaring Creek* is almost unbearably monotonous. This, however, would seem to be precisely the film-maker's intention since the very monotony encourages what Scott MacDonald, in a more general context, has called the 'retraining of perception'.¹⁶ That is, one comes to appreciate, in a way that is not merely factual, and may even be experiential, the vast number of animals involved. Also, within the endlessly repeated crossing of the stream, one comes to attend to the variation within the flock: sheep are proverbially animals that copy one another unthinkingly but here we see each animal apparently crossing in its own distinctive way.

Finally, the meditative reverie into which one has been encouraged to fall is broken as a number of mounted figures bring up the rear of the flock from the right, and also cross the stream. After the last rider leaves the frame on the left, the image of the now empty creek continues for a further 15 seconds before cutting to black. However, the sound of the roaring creek continues unabated under the black screen for a further 25 seconds, returning us metaphorically to the beginning of the film. Indeed, for those watching the film on a loop in a gallery, it would literally return them to the beginning and the crossing would start again.

For Scott MacDonald, *Hell Roaring Creek* represents an 'accomplished instance' of avant-garde film-making in the 'structural' manner. However, Castaing-Taylor himself, referring to *Sheep Rushes* as whole, describes his objectives in more philosophical terms, presenting the installation as an

attempt to engage spectatorial attention in ‘sheer manifestations of being’ which, he believes, can be captured in ‘figural’ forms of expression, but only if one is prepared to abandon narrative and other discursive, linear modes of representation. In embracing the figural so wholeheartedly and rejecting discourse, *Sheep Rushes* represents a significant departure from narrative-based forms of film-making, including, of course, *Sweetgrass*.¹⁷

Yet while one might entirely respect Castaing-Taylor’s philosophico-artistic aims in producing this installation, this is very different from the project of ethnographic film – if this is conceived of as an attempt to use the medium of film to understand the world from the point of view of the subjects and to explore the connections between ideas, practices and relations that are at play in the construction of their social world. If the practice of ethnography is understood in this latter sense, while one may discern certain ethnographic qualities in some of the other films in the suite, it is difficult to identify anything that is specifically ethnographic about *Hell Roaring Creek*.

In watching this film, we may come to understand something about the behaviour of herded sheep while experiencing vicariously their crossing of the stream in vast numbers. But we learn very little about the human beings in the film or about their relationship to the sheep. In short, however accomplished *Hell Roaring Creek* may be as an example of ‘structural’ film-making, or however successful it may be in capturing ‘sheer manifestations of being’, its contribution to ethnography is surely minimal.

A DETOUR THROUGH THE AMERICAN DREAM: *FOREIGN PARTS*

Hell Roaring Creek anticipated the general direction that the praxis underlying SEL films would take in subsequent years. This has involved a progressive movement away from ethnography conceived as a process of dialogical engagement with the subjects and towards the evocation, through a combination of a privileged observational camera and highly elaborated soundtracks, of cinematic experiences that are not anchored in the ideas and relations of the subjects but rather give expression, in Gardnerian fashion, to the artistic or philosophical concerns of the film-makers. But while this may have been the general direction of travel, it has been a movement that has been circuitous, as demonstrated particularly by *Foreign Parts*, an SEL film released in 2011. This is one of the most dialogical of all the major films produced by the SEL prior to 2015, including even *Sweetgrass*.

Foreign Parts was shot in a vehicle scrapyard at Willets Point, a rambling agglomeration of car body shops beneath the Line No. 7 subway track in the Queens district of New York City. It has a running time of 80 minutes

and was the outcome of collaboration between Vrena Paravel, a French anthropologist who was by then an associate of the SEL, and J. P. Sniadecki, one of the first students to enrol on the SEL's Media Practice programme in 2006. After completing that programme, Sniadecki had gone on to carry out doctoral research about independent documentary production in Beijing and at the same time, to travel widely around China, becoming a prolific maker of non-fiction films in many different parts of the country. These films showed Sniadecki to be a talented cinematographer, with a discerning eye, though their ethnographicness is limited by the fact that they are mostly based on no more than brief acquaintance with the subjects.

The original idea for *Foreign Parts* came from Paravel, who stumbled upon Willets Point when making an earlier film about the various communities connected by the No. 7 subway line. She had been struck by the juxtaposition of dynamism and dereliction, beauty and squalor, the order within apparent chaos of the site, and immediately saw it as an opportunity to make a film about a location that could serve as a microcosm of what she later described as the 'larger narratives in the history of the [United States] – such as post-industrialisation, immigration, political violence, environmental decay, and the breakdown of democracy'.¹⁸ Owing to personal security concerns raised by her working there alone, Lucien Castaing-Taylor suggested that to make the film Paravel should join forces with Sniadecki, whose previous work in China had raised some of the same issues.

Paravel and Sniadecki visited Willets Point over a two-year period 'on and off' in 2008 and 2009, sharing the camera as well as the direction, and working through the various different seasons of the year. After a lengthy period of editing, the film began appearing at festivals in late 2010, and the following year it was released on DVD accompanied by a Bonus Extras feature including eight shorter films. These expand on various issues and situations dealt with in the main film and provide an interesting complement to it.

Ernst Karel again makes a major contribution, laying down a beautifully layered soundtrack in post-production that subtly reconciles the grinding sounds of the scrapyard, the booming of overhead aeroplanes and the almost ever-present strains of Latino music with the speech of the characters, and even some moments of relative tranquility, as when a cock crows one quiet Sunday morning. The cinematography is also generally of a very high standard and features many long observational shots, often exquisitely executed. Much of the material appears to have been shot hand-held, with a notable prevalence of extended tracking shots that follow people walking. But there are also many beautifully composed formal shots that would appear to have been shot from a tripod. Indeed, the tripod itself shows up in the background to quite a number of shots.

Through an engaging mosaic of sequences, *Foreign Parts* certainly offers a strong sense of the general atmosphere of life in Willets Park. However, from a strictly ethnographic perspective, notwithstanding its excellent technical quality, it suffers from a certain lack of focus: the film contains many different threads, but none of them is pursued in any great depth.

As an intertitle explains right at the end of the film, at the time that *Foreign Parts* was shot, there were around 250 small businesses at Willets Point providing employment to some 2,000 people, many of whom were relatively recent migrants to the USA. The migrants who appear in the film are preponderantly Latinos, though it is clear that while some are from the Hispanic Caribbean, others are from Central America and others again from Andean South America. From the Bonus Extras films, we discover that there are also people at Willets Point from Jamaica, some francophone Black Antillians, presumably from Haiti, and people whose accent suggests that they are from Eastern Europe or the Balkans. A man with a South Asian accent appears briefly in the main film, and at somewhat greater length in one of the Bonus films. As far as this migrant population is concerned, the film rarely gets beyond the forecourts of their businesses, either physically or metaphorically, offering little insight into the ideas, dreams and hopes of these migrants, or the family and personal ties that no doubt radiate out from Willets Point far across the world and along which travel remittances, sentiments and desire. A *Jaguar* or *Moi, un Noir* for our times, this film is not.

But to be fair, as the film-makers have explained in interviews, whatever the title might suggest, *Foreign Parts* was not intended to be a film about migrants as such. Certainly, the subjects with whom they primarily engage dialogically are not foreigners, but rather long-term US citizens. They include Julia, a cat-loving middle-aged African American woman who lives in a car, has an issue with alcohol and subsists by panhandling. They also include Joe Ardizzone, a retired 78-year-old who has lived there most of his life, and Luís and Sara, a young couple who also live in a car. In one of the Bonus films, we discover that Luís is originally from Florida, while Sara identifies herself at one point in the main film as 'the only white girl' at Willets Point. Their story provides one of the minor threads within the film, but it is not pursued to any great extent.

Of these English-speaking subjects, only Luís is directly involved in the business of the scrapyards, but we see him at work no more than briefly, seemingly because he spent at least some of the filming period in gaol. More broadly, the social relationships that hold Willets Point together as a working environment are only superficially explored. Although there are many shots of people engaged in work-related activities, there is little sense of this work as a social process, be it as a skilled practice, or as a business with, no doubt, any number of dark sides and 'angles', or as an activity that

15.3 *Foreign Parts* (2011). Left, Road Runner says his prayers as if he were before the Wailing Wall. Right, Joe Ardizzone: ‘When the real estate taxes come up ... then all of sudden they know exactly where we live.’

takes places within a given set of interpersonal and interethnic relationships, let alone as part of individual or collective imaginaries.

The only subject involved in the scrapyards business whom the film-makers follow at any significant length is a middle-aged man, nicknamed ‘Road Runner’, on account of his role directing clients to the businesses where they might be able to get the spares that they need. Early on in the film, Road Runner is visited by two young Hassidic rabbis, who provide him with tefillin so that he can recite his prayers. This he duly does, and in a wonderful scene, with power tools whizzing in the background, he is seen reciting prayers in front of the corrugated iron wall of his workshop, as if it were the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem (figure 15.3, left). Unfortunately, Road Runner soon drops out of the film, though the same two rabbis reappear much later and try to persuade another, older man to strap on the tefillin and say his prayers, assuring him of all the luck that it will bring to his business. However, this second man declines, preferring instead to share a glass of vodka with his visitors. But scenes of this kind that reach into what Ervin Goffman might have called the backstage of the lives of those actively involved in the scrapyards are the exception rather than the rule, both in *Foreign Parts* itself and in the films offered as Bonus Extras.

However, if I understand the film-makers’ intentions correctly, as described in their media interviews, even the English-speaking interlocutors are of secondary importance to their project: the main focus of the film was not intended to be particular human subjects as such, but rather the scrapyards themselves and the many contradictions inherent to the American Dream that it symbolised.¹⁹ This would explain why the film features so many lengthy observational shots of the physical features of the scrapyards. But while these certainly impart a sensorially rich sense of the place, to expect an audience to read them as an explicit critique of the American Dream seems to me rather optimistic, not least because there must be many places that look and sound like Willets Point all over the world.

There is also a more explicit, locally focused political story threaded through the film, even if most of the time it lies in the background. About a quarter of the way into the film, Sara, the 'white' homeless woman, reveals that all the businesses are going to have to move in order to make way for the redevelopment of the site. Thereafter, the main political argument of the film is carried by Joe Ardizzzone, who is totally uncompromising: as he sees it, the city politicians neglect Willets Point except when it comes to taxation; the planners responsible for redevelopment know absolutely nothing; and the whole scheme is merely a ploy for the mayor to reward his wealthy friends. Joe spends much of the film, and also some of the Bonus Extra films, stomping manically around Willets Point shouting these opinions, Canute-like, all seemingly to little effect (figure 15.3, right).

What is interesting from an ethnographic point of view is why Joe's arguments gained such little traction – despite being very well founded, as matters turned out.²⁰ One of the Bonus Extra films suggest some of the reasons why: many migrants in fact thought that they would be better off relocated to another site, while organising political resistance would have been difficult given that so few people had any legal rights of residence. But these complexities are not explored systematically through the following of political processes or relationships. There is a brief scene of a political meeting that fails to start because of lack of attendance, and another wonderful and veritably Kafkaesque scene of Joe visiting the grand local government offices to try and find what is going on, but to no avail. Later, among the final credits, beneath an intertitle announcing the sale of the site, we hear some voices finally expressing resistance to the process, but these remain anonymous while the circumstances of this resistance, so at odds with what we have seen in the films, remain unexplained.

Certainly *Foreign Parts* has many merits as a descriptive account of the scrapyards and offers some understanding of the lives of the homeless people who found a refuge there. As I commented in relation to *Sweetgrass*, it is impossible for any ethnographic film to cover everything about any given subject. But one cannot help but feel that a greater focus on the ethnography of the migrants' experience, and the economic and political processes surrounding the scrapyards would have afforded the film-makers the opportunity to address more directly the 'larger narratives' about the USA that had struck Paravel so forcefully when she first stumbled upon Willets Point. More generally, for all the ambitious claims by the film-makers to be invested in the 'plenitude of lived experience', 'the sensual weight of lived duration' and even 'the magnitude of human existence', this is a film that is more about surfaces than about what lies beneath. That is, it is more about technical processes, public spaces and the material environment

than it is about social relationships, private domains and what is going on inside the hearts and minds of the subjects who once made their living in Willets Point.

LEVIATHAN AND MANAKAMANA

The progressive, if circuitous, movement of the SEL away from a conception of ethnography of the kind on which this book is based went a decisive step further with the production of two subsequent films, *Leviathan*, released in 2012, and *Manakamana*, released in 2014. In that these two films involve a non-dialogical and arguably objectifying scrutiny of their human subjects, they could even be said to be at odds with much contemporary ethnographic practice. But this has not prevented them from being hailed as masterpieces of ‘ethnographic’ cinema by reviewers in the mass media and from the world of the visual arts.

The first of these films, *Leviathan*, was jointly directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel. This film does not appear to have been based on extended ethnographic fieldwork. Rather, it was shot over the course of six expeditions, each of ‘up to two weeks’, onboard the *Athena*, a trawler working the Grand Banks fishing grounds off the northeast Atlantic coast of the USA. This trawler was operating out of New Bedford, Massachusetts, one of several ports used by nineteenth-century whalers of the kind immortalised in Herman Melville’s classic novel, *Moby-Dick*. The title of the film is in part a reference to the eponymous great white whale that is Captain Ahab’s nemesis in that work.

However, this is only one of several possible connotations of the title. A quotation from the Book of Job at the beginning of the film (reminiscent of the quotation from W. B. Yeats’s poem on the Upanishads at the beginning of *Forest of Bliss*) suggests that the title is also a reference, not to a cetacean monster as such, but rather to some more abstract and fearsome force deep within the sea itself. Meanwhile, in interviews, the film-makers have suggested that the title could also be considered a reference to the trawler, or even a reference to the film itself. On an entirely different note, Thomas Hobbes’s celebrated seventeenth-century political tract of the same title has also been invoked.²¹

These multiple connotations of the title – which, moreover, does not actually appear in the film itself until the end credits – are symptomatic of a more general reluctance on the part of the film-makers to tie the film to any particular theme or agenda. Paravel has commented that even they themselves do not know exactly what *Leviathan* is about, while Castaing-Taylor has explained that they were seeking to make a film that did not

'say' anything, but rather offered an experience that would not be reduced in any way by having a meaning attached to it. And indeed, it is entirely possible to appreciate the film simply as an intriguing cinematic interplay of light, colours, shapes, movement and sounds, without worrying overmuch about their referential significance. Considered purely in these terms, it is undoubtedly an astounding tour de force.

In a practical sense, *Leviathan* consists primarily of a series of prolonged shots, mostly in wide-angle, mainly of various different aspects of the technical processes taking place onboard the trawler. Most of the shots were taken with GoPro cameras, which were preferred to HD video cameras on account of the more filmic quality of the images. It was also mostly shot at night using the powerful lights of the trawler for illumination: this, together with the day-glo colours of the equipment and the crew's all-weather overalls, affords the most dazzling visual effects in the exterior shots taken onboard the trawler, while those taken out to sea pick out, in the most remarkable manner, evanescent flashes of surging foam and the ghostly white forms of the flocking seagulls following the boat.

The film-makers have explained that in all but four shots, the cameras were attached to themselves or to the crew, or were suspended from poles that they were holding. Even so, they mostly offer a highly privileged perspective on what is going on, that is, one that would not normally be available to a human participant in the events portrayed. Even the shots taken from GoPro cameras attached to the helmets of the crew offer a perspective that is distortedly frenetic and wide-angle compared to that which would be afforded to a normal human observer standing in the same position.

For the most part, the action roves with ease, in a manner reminiscent of the Vertovian ciné-eye, from the crew hauling in chains or gutting fish, to deck-level shots of fish swilling about in the bilge waters, then out to sea and under the water, before turning upwards to show the seagulls in flight, sometimes as seen from below, sometimes from above. At various points, the camera hangs down the side of the hull and we see a stream of bloodied effluent and fish parts cascading from the deck into the sea, which in turn attract the seagulls who alternately whirl in the air or dive into the water. In the latter part of the film, we look down from the top of the mast and also from the vantage point of a camera situated on a pole in front of the prow, looking down as the trawler surges powerfully through the swell. This dramatic visual account is accompanied by an equally privileged and highly elaborated soundtrack, perhaps more accurately described as composed than edited by Ernst Karel, this time in collaboration with Jacob Ribicoff, a leading feature film sound designer.

There is no narrative to the film, be it chronological, thematic or formal, though the brilliant sound composition lends it a certain rhythmic quality, in the manner of an avant-garde musical work. Apart from a few more

15.4 *Leviathan* (2012). Left, the only conventionally well-lit shot of a human being in the entire film is a reflection. Right, many of the most dramatic shots were taken from GoPro cameras dropped over the side of the trawler.

or less incomprehensible shouts and tannoy announcements, there is also almost no dialogue and very little interaction between the human subjects, let alone between film-makers and subjects. There is one conventionally well-lit and naturalistic shot of a member of the crew operating a winch, though even this is only a reflection on a glass window (figure 15.4, left). There is also a shot of a man taking a shower as seen through a steamed-up lens. But otherwise the shots of the crew mostly take the form of close-ups, often in low light, of no more than parts of their bodies as they go about their work. Meanwhile, confused jumbles of dying fish slosh back and forth in the tanks, a seabird struggles to escape from the deck, as all the while chains clank loudly, the motors of the winches grind, gulls cry and the deep unrelenting sea pounds, roars and thunders by turn. The overall impression is of a cacophonous and dystopian world of chaos, tumult and destruction.

As a work of cinematic craft, *Leviathan* has been showered with praise by the mass media reviewers and rightly so. But considered more narrowly as an ethnographic account of life on board the *Athena*, its status is more debatable. It may be 'immersive', as so many of the reviews of the film proclaim, but this is true only in relation to the physical universe that it represents: it certainly does not immerse itself in the social and cultural world of the human subjects.

In the same way that in making *Sweetgrass*, Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash decided to dispense with the material shot in Big Timber, in making *Leviathan*, Castaing-Taylor and Paravel concluded that the 50 hours of material that they shot on shore in the factories and warehouses of New Bedford, while interesting in itself, would be difficult to reconcile with the very different kind of material shot once out at sea. But while it was probably a good decision not to burden the film with this on-shore material, not only does *Leviathan* make no reference to the social relations that link the trawler to the shore, but it does not offer any account of the social relations of the people onboard either.

Leviathan certainly evokes, in a very powerful way, the brutal physical impact of this mode of fishing, both on the crew and the fish stocks. The crew is shown to be exhausted, their arms lacerated by their work. As for the fish, we are offered only too many close-up images of the cruel death that they suffer: a particularly memorable image is of two crewmen holding up a series of ray fish with hooks and then hacking off their wings. However, the film offers us no sense of how the people on board the *Athena* relate to one another, either as a crew or as individuals, what they think of the experience of being at sea or about the sea itself, nor of their sense of their work and how it articulates with the rest of their lives. The film-makers offer us a very strong impression of what it is like to be on board the *Athena*, but do the crew feel the same way? It is impossible to tell. Nor do we get any sense of the skills that the crew bring to their work, which in the case of those who have to steer that ship through stormy conditions at night, such as we see in the film, must be considerable.

In fact, human subjects feature centrally in relatively few shots in the film as a whole: most are primarily concerned with the sea, the fish, the seagulls or the technology. In the last ten minutes of the film, there are no human beings at all. To the extent that they do feature, the crew are mostly presented in a highly objectified form, as tattooed obese bodies or anonymous waterproof-clad beings, engaged in fragmentary mechanical activities, without opinions, identities or beliefs, and almost as mute as the fish species with whom, in an ironic touch, they share equal billing in the final credits. Thus for all its many virtues as a work of cinema, given its almost total neglect of the social and cultural aspects of life on board the *Athena*, it is difficult to see how *Leviathan* could be regarded specifically as an ethnographic film in any strong sense.

As with the other SEL films described above, the DVD of *Leviathan* also features another shorter film, but whereas the Bonus Films of *Sweetgrass* and *Foreign Parts* enrich the ethnographic account offered by the main film, in this case the additional film merely offers a further objectification of the human subjects. This film, entitled *Still Life*, consists of a single unchanging wide-angle shot, unbroken for 29 minutes, which shows the crewmen's galley area as recorded by a seemingly unmanned camera set up at the end of the dining table, with a television set above, out of the field of vision, and a frying pan and a metal casserole on the table itself. There is a similar shot in the main film, in which an exhausted crewman is shown watching a television show for several minutes before he finally falls asleep. In *Still Life*, the camera records this space as three crewmen come in and out, engage in some desultory and largely inaudible conversation, and look up at the television situated above the camera. There are a couple of minutes at each end of the film in which there is no one in the galley at all, and

the audience is offered the opportunity to consider the dining table with its frying pan and its casserole standing in isolation.

If *Leviathan* has something in common with Robert Gardner's work in its existential reach and grand cinematic gesture, *Still Life* offers us a work that, in common with *Hell Roaring Creek* before it, lies rather at the interface between cinema and installation, and as such, would probably be most constructively regarded, not as a film of ethnographic ambition, but rather as a work that is in dialogue with 'structural' cinema.

The same is true, I suggest, of *Manakamana*. Certainly, this film has both the formal structure and underlying theoretical rationale that are typical of this genre of cinema. The directors of this film were Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez, and as with so many SEL films, Ernst Karel carried out the postproduction sound-mix. As a contemporary of J. P. Sniadecki at Harvard, Spray was also among the first students to take the media training courses offered there after the SEL was set up in 2006. For some years prior to enrolling on the course, she had been regularly visiting Nepal, where she had studied the Gandharva, an itinerant caste of traditional musicians. For his part, Velez was a documentary film-maker who had completed an MFA in Los Angeles where he had come into contact with a number of leading 'structural' film-makers, including James Benning and Thom Andersen.²²

In practical terms, *Manakamana* consists of eleven unbroken takes, each of approximately 10 minutes' duration. Ten of these are of people riding in a cable car in the Nepalese Himalayas, either on their way up to, or on their way back down from a mountain-top temple dedicated to a Hindu goddess from whose name the title of the film is derived. There is also one 10-minute take of some tethered goats making the upward journey, on their way to being offered as a sacrifice to the goddess. Owing to the entirely fortuitous circumstance that the journey time of the cable cars, be it up or down, was slightly less than the 11-minute duration of a standard 400 ft 16 mm magazine, Velez had the idea to shoot the journeys on film rather than on digital video. In order to ensure that all the shots were taken from a common fixed point and that there was no camera movement, the film-makers arranged for a wooden structure to be built on one side of a cable car cabin into which they then inserted their tripod and a 16 mm camera. This was not just any 16 mm camera, however, but rather the very same Aaton 7 LTR that Robert Gardner had used to shoot *Forest of Bliss* and which he had subsequently donated to the Film Study Center at Harvard.

From this position, ranged on one side of the cabin, with Spray taking sound and Velez on camera, they filmed their subjects, numbering variously between one and three people, sitting parallel to themselves, a few feet away on the other side of car. With the camera rock-steady within its wooden structure, the framing, a wide-angle shot of the subjects' upper body, remains

constant throughout all eleven takes. Meanwhile, beyond the subjects, the mountain slopes, in slightly soft focus, rush by in the background, in a manner that is weirdly reminiscent of the back projections in the car scenes of Hollywood cinema from the 1930s. On the soundtrack, the regular clattering sound as the car passes the pylons holding up the cables marks the passage of time within each journey in an intriguing metronomic fashion.

The six upward journeys, including the goats' journey, are presented in the first half of the film, one after another, followed by the five downward journeys in the second half. There is no break in the film between the journeys since the film-makers take advantage of the darkness into which the cars arrive at the terminal to cut directly to the start of the next journey, which also begins in the dark. The sound of machinery turning the cars around in preparation for another journey, no doubt carefully mixed by Karel at post-production, enhances the sense of continuity between the takes.²³

Many of the travellers are elderly and wear traditional local dress, though they are often accompanied by a younger person who appears to be a relative. But one of the upward journeys features three longhaired Nepalese heavy metal rockers while one of the downward trips shows two young women who are clearly not from the local area, one of whom appears to be a North American tourist, the other Asian, possibly Nepali, but who also speaks with a North American accent. In another of the downward journeys, two traditional musicians tune up and play their sarangis, four-stringed instruments played with a bow (though the bows are not actually in shot). Each time a new set of travellers emerges from the darkness constitutes, in effect, a minor but amusing *coup de théâtre* (figure 15.5).

None of the travellers is actually followed all the way to the goddess's temple, though during the two-minute black transition that demarcates the upward from the downward journeys, and which follows immediately after the goats' ascent at the midpoint of the film, there are not only machinery noises, but also the ringing of bells, crowd noises and some goat bleats, signifying, one supposes, that the unfortunate animals have met their allotted fate. Only in one case, that of a couple, seemingly mother and son, the latter carrying a cockerel that pokes its head into shot on the way up, do we see travellers making both upward and downward journeys. The upturned feet of the cockerel that are just visible at the bottom of the screen on their way down suggest that its life too has been offered to the goddess.

The elegant formal simplicity of *Manakamana* belies the great amount of care that went into achieving this effect. The eleven takes of the final film were selected from a total of thirty-six trips in the cable car, filmed over the course of eight weeks spread across two different summers, in 2011 and 2012. Most of the takes derive from the first visit: the second visit was

15.5 *Manakamana* (2014). Each time a new set of travellers emerges from the darkness works as an amusing *coup de théâtre*.

mainly to shoot ‘pick-ups’, including the shot of the goats. The temperature inside the cars was often very high, and they were like ‘mobile greenhouses’ in the summer. Post-production was very lengthy: it took eighteen months to select and order the eleven shots that make up the final film. Initially, the film-makers ordered the film as a series of eighteen sequentially up-and-down journeys, but concluded that in order to focus the audience’s attention on the ‘small human revelations’ happening in front of the camera, the more counterintuitive final structure was necessary.

Within this structure, they located the first spoken words at a classical Hollywood plot point, around twenty-five minutes into the film, with the explicit purpose of bringing about a radical change in the audience’s expectations at that point. A similar degree of thought went into the final shot: at one stage, the film-makers intended to end with the sarangi players taking the film home with their music, but then realised that they had a rather more effective ‘character arc’ in the couple who went up with a live cockerel and came down with a dead one.

However, the ‘small human revelations’ that, in the film-makers’ view, constitute the ethnography of the film are indeed very slight. For the most part, the travellers do or say very little and what they do say is mostly trivial or fragmentary. During the first two upward journeys, one involving an elderly man and a boy whom one presumes to be his grandson (figure 15.5, top left), and the other a woman on her own bearing what appears to be a floral offering to the goddess, not a single word is spoken. Instead the subjects avert their eyes from the camera and stare out of the windows, only occasionally stealing a furtive glance at the film-makers. The third

journey is made by the couple carrying a cockerel as an offering to the goddess. Initially, they seem very ill at ease, but eventually they make some desultory comments about how the ride makes their ears pop and also about the countryside below.

By comparison, the three elderly ladies of the fourth ride are positively garrulous. One laments to another – evidently her co-wife – that their husband could not come on account of a twisted ankle and then they too engage in some chitchat about the countryside passing below. The same speaker also relates a legend about Manakamana and although she does not actually address the camera, this appears to be primarily for the benefit of the film-makers since her companions pay very little attention, preferring to look out of the window. No doubt they have heard the story many times before.

Then come the rockers, who chatter on in a superficial way about their lives, their ears popping, and also about the countryside. They have small digital cameras and take pictures of themselves, the countryside, a small kitten that one of them is carrying, indeed everything except the film crew sitting directly in front of them (figure 15.5, top right). Last of the upward travellers are the goats, who are transported in a different sort of car, open to the elements. They say nothing, of course, though they do bleat a great deal at the beginning. Their appearance from out of the darkness of the terminal represents the most humorous *coup de théâtre* of all, though its comedic value is soon tempered by the realisation that formal structure of the film will require one to spend the next ten minutes looking at their backsides.

The ethnographic content of the five downward journeys is no more substantial. They involve, first, a woman with a freshly anointed forehead who comments on the beauty of her souvenir model of the temple (though this is out of shot), then come the North American tourist and her Asian friend (figure 15.5, bottom left), then two local women, probably mother and daughter, who have difficulty eating melting ice cream on a stick, then the traditional musicians (figure 15.5, bottom right). There is much further embarrassed silence and trivial commentary on the countryside below. Finally, the couple with the newly sacrificed cockerel return, their foreheads also freshly anointed. After again sitting in awkward silence for some minutes, apparently engrossed in their own thoughts, the woman comments that their daughter should have come instead of her. But the man reminds her that she was the one ‘who was invited’. Then, after some further minor comments about the largely invisible landscape, the film stock runs out just before the car arrives at the terminal, leaving both this final journey and the film as a whole to be completed in sound only.

On its release on the international film festival circuit, *Manakamana* was widely acclaimed as a huge success. Although a number of reviews noted

that it provoked walk-outs by audience members frustrated by its silences, the film also generated much positive comment, of diverse kinds. Some reviewers saw the film as a metaphor for human life as a journey suspended on a thread; some extolled the beauty of the landscape and the aura of tranquility within the cable car cabin; others again appreciated the formal parallels between the mechanical movement through time and space of the cabin with the movement through time and space of cinema. Clearly the film 'worked' for many people as an artistic or poetic experience.

Yet although in all these regards *Manakamana* may be magnificent, it is not easily classifiable as an ethnographic film, certainly not as one of any great depth or substance. For, as with a number of SEL films, it remains on the surface of its subject matter from an ethnographic point of view in that it eschews any in-depth exploration of the ideas of its subjects. As an ethnographic film about journeying to a holy site, it is surely a major shortcoming that it offers no insight into the motivations of the travellers. One learns from sources outside the film that the goddess Manakamana grants wishes, indeed that is what her name means. But what wishes do the travellers hope that she will grant? And how does the sacrifice of their animals fit into the relationship between pilgrims and the goddess?

In interviews, the film-makers speak about the practice of sacrifice as if it involved some form of mystical communion with divinity; but on comparative ethnographic grounds, I wonder whether, in fact, the subjects have a very much more pragmatic attitude, seeing it as an entirely rational exchange of a valued animal for the goddess's intervention, to ensure an entirely mundane form of good fortune such as a return to good health or a good crop. But there is no way of telling, for instead of any insight into these matters, we are offered the travellers' mostly banal ruminations on the largely invisible terrain below. These comments are subtitled but, according to a leading specialist on the anthropology of Nepal, the translations are not entirely reliable.²⁴

However, arguably the most significant limitation of *Manakamana* considered specifically as an ethnographic film relates to the fact that it entirely obscures the long-standing nature of the relationship between the subjects and Stephanie Spray. From the interviews with the film-makers, it transpires that most of the subjects were very well-known to Spray. The three elderly ladies were her 'adopted Nepali mothers', while other subjects had appeared in her earlier films, notably the two traditional musicians, a man and his nephew. Even the outsiders, the young tourist women, were 'acquaintances'. Nor were these subjects merely travelling in the cable cars by chance when the film-makers happened to be making their film. On the contrary, as suggested by the reference to an invitation in the last journey, in the manner of a Sharon Lockhart film, the subjects appear to have been carefully selected in advance by the film-makers.

In one sense, it is reassuring to discover that this was the case. Clearly, from an ethical point of view, it would have been completely intolerable if the film had been made on the basis of the entrapment of unsuspecting pilgrims who, when innocently getting into the cable car, suddenly found themselves confronted by two foreigners with an intimidating array of film equipment. But at the same time, this information about the lengthy pre-existing relationship between Spray and the subjects makes one realise just how artificial the situation presented in the film actually is. In effect, what this film offers us is a sort of artistic experiment in which selected subjects were placed in front of a fixed camera and then asked over the 10-minute duration of the journey not to make eye contact, let alone speak to a person sitting a few feet away whom they may have known for many years, in some cases for more than a decade. Given these circumstances, it is little wonder that many of the subjects look embarrassed, say little or nothing of any significance, avert their eyes, or simply sit there mutely, apparently lost in their own thoughts.

The film-makers, and indeed some interviewers, detect in the silent non-verbal behaviour of the subjects of *Manakamana* a whole range of 'polarities' between presence and absence, the sacred and the profane, time and space, and so on. But, as I would read it, this behaviour would have had less to do with such transcendent matters than with the abnormal and restrictive conditions under which the film was made. Can we really believe, for example, that a Nepalese grandfather taking his grandson on a trip on a cable car, as in the first take, would say absolutely nothing to him for the entire journey, were it not for the presence of the film-makers and their equipment? The withdrawal of the subjects into themselves had surely nothing to do with religious inspiration, and everything to do with the fact that impassivity was the only means whereby the subjects could protect themselves against the intrusion of the 16 mm camera encased in a wooden structure that was whirring away a couple of feet from their noses.

In short, while the film-makers may have every right to claim that *Manakamana* has integrity as a work of 'structural' cinema, as an ethnographic film its integrity is more debatable. In one of the interviews, Spray remarks that in her films, she aims to 'unsettle presumptions about racial or cultural difference and the inequalities that they perpetuate'. This is an entirely laudable aim and no doubt one that is most sincerely held. However, it is difficult to reconcile this aim with *Manakamana*, which, in its obscuring of the relationship between the film-maker and subjects, and in its offering up of its largely mute subjects to the intense scrutiny of an intrusively close and non-participatory camera, is uncomfortably reminiscent of retrogressive, entirely discredited modes of ethnographic representation.

As with Robert Gardner's oeuvre, probably the most constructive way to approach the recent films produced by the SEL film-makers is to applaud

their ambitious cinematic quality and their bold experimentalism, even while recognising that they are on a journey that may have started at the same place, but which has now taken them to somewhere that is far removed from the project on which most contemporary practitioners of ethnography, whatever the medium, are engaged most of the time. ‘Negative capability’ may produce magnificent works of art, but most ethnographers, for good or for ill, remain committed to ‘reaching after fact and reason’, however ‘irritable’ that might be.

Thus while there is much to admire in the films produced by the SEL in terms of the craft that has gone into their making, in my view the more general praxis on which they are based does not offer the best model for the future direction of ethnographic film-making. In the next and final chapter of this book, I will consider a number of films that are based on a more dialogical, participatory praxis and which therefore seem to me to suggest various paths along which ethnographic film-making may develop in the future that are more generally in tune with contemporary ethnographic practice.

Notes

- 1 I am very grateful to Lucien Castaing-Taylor for commenting on an almost final draft of this chapter in February 2019 and in so doing, correcting various errors of fact and challenging certain interpretations. We agreed though that on some matters, we would simply have to agree to disagree ...
- 2 These earlier publications of Lucien Castaing-Taylor, then known only as Lucien Taylor, would include Taylor (1996; 1998a; 1998b).
- 3 See the discussion of *The Hunters* in Chapter 4 for this book, pp. 133–8, and of Robert Gardner’s work more generally in Chapter 9.
- 4 See the Film Study Center website at filmstudycenter.org/about/.
- 5 MacDonald (2013), 315. See Karel’s personal website at ek.klingt.org for a detailed account of his remarkable productivity across a range of different sonic fields.
- 6 See the Harvard Film Archive site at https://library.harvard.edu/film/general_info.html
- 7 Personal communication, February 2019.
- 8 See Sheets (2016) and particularly Lockhart’s website at www.lockhartstudio.com.
- 9 Heidegger (1978), 217.
- 10 See particularly Chapter 10, pp. 295–8. In commenting on a draft of this chapter in February 2019, Castaing-Taylor pointed out that two of his most recent works with Véréna Paravel, namely, *Sominoloquies* (2017), which is structured around the oneiric monologues of Dion McGregor, a 1960s songwriter living in New York, and *Caniba* (2018), based on the also largely monological testimony of the (in)famous Japanese cannibal, Issei Sagawa, are as he put it, graphically, ‘stuffed full of words from nose to tail’. However, these films fall outside the temporal remit of this book and, regrettably, I have not yet had the opportunity to view them. But judging by the trailers and reviews on the Web, neither film would appear to have specifically ethnographic objectives.
- 11 See Peleg (2017).
- 12 Unless otherwise indicated, the details given here about the making of *Sweetgrass* are drawn freely either from the film-makers’ commentary on the DVD or from the interviews that they have given to Scott MacDonald (2015), 373–93, and Jay Kuehner (see Castaing-Taylor 2016).

- 13 The film was even spotted by one Facebook follower as an Air France inflight film, which must surely be some kind of 'first' for an ethnographic film produced from within an academic institution.
- 14 In this discussion of *Sheep Rushes*, I draw particularly on an interview that Castaing-Taylor gave to Scott MacDonald (2015), 393–400.
- 15 Gardner (1972), 35. See also Chapter 9, p. 262.
- 16 MacDonald (2013), 324.
- 17 Compare and contrast MacDonald (2013), 325–6 with MacDonald (2015), 396.
- 18 See Alvarez (2012).
- 19 In addition to the textual interview with Alvarez (2012) already cited, see the interview with the film-makers at the Punto de Vista festival in Pamplona, Spain, in November 2011, which is available in two different forms on YouTube.
- 20 Joe's cynicism proved to be right on the money: after the filming had been completed, the Willets Point site, which until that point had been public land, was sold to a private property developer, who was indeed a friend of the mayor, as well as being a former partner of the notorious Ponzi scheme fraudster Bernie Madoff. For a journalistic account of the shenanigans surrounding the development of Willets Point, see www.heralddeparis.com/hoodwinked-are-the-wilpons-about-to-pull-off-the-ultimate-developers-dream/237510 (last consulted 13 February 2019).
- 21 In this discussion, I draw particularly on an interview given by the film-makers to Scott MacDonald (2015), 404–10.
- 22 This discussion of *Manakamana* draws on a number of sources, including Spray's website at www.stephaniespray.com/about/, and interviews with Spray and Velez conducted by Scott MacDonald (2015), 410–17, and by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, the producers of the film. The latter interview formed part of the film press-kit that was available at www.manakamanafilm.com/director-qa, though as of February 2019 this website had apparently expired.
- 23 Connoisseurs of Jean Rouch's films will be reminded of his two-roll 16 mm fiction *Gare du Nord* (1965) in which the darkness of an elevator shaft is used to make an invisible join between the two 10-minute takes that make up the complete film (Henley 2009, 187–92).
- 24 David Gellner (2015) detects various minor errors, including, for example, the mistranslation of 'this is like falling from a plane' as 'they probably built it from a plane'.