visual ethnography

www.vejournal.org
DOI: 10.12835/ve2016.2-0069

VOL. 5 | N. 2 | 2016

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TUNING SOLARIS: FROM THE DARKNESS OF A SHOPPING MALL TOWARDS POST-HUMANIST CINEMA.

ABSTRACT

Building upon the audiovisual project on a Tallinn shopping mall, the article outlines the conceptual resources vital to the ethico-aesthetic agenda of sensory ethnography, and links them with the ambitions of an emerging post-humanist cinema. By doing so it tells the story of a personal struggle for the embodiment of a non-representative and object-oriented stance and challenges the main premises of human-centered observational filmmaking style. Finally, the article argues that by provoking the experience of disorientation and more-than-human closeness, sensory ethnography can contribute to the birth of a post-human awareness and an ontological reconstitution of our being-in-the-world in the Anthropocene era.

KEYWORDS

visual anthropology; sensory ethnography; observational cinema; atmosphere; perspective; immersion; empathy; more-than-human; speculative realism; non-representative theory

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INTRODUCTION

"Is the soundscape post-produced?" asks a man in the audience after the film screening of a short portrait of a shopping mall. As I am trying to delineate what the main point of the question could be, I ponder the presence of non-diegetic sounds, the employment of sound filters, a number of volume corrections and the principles upon which the transitions between different sonic layers were made. Is the question about the veracity of the cinematic account? Is he interested to know whether I am mocking him?

Since I see no reason to cover anything up, my response is a plain "yes." Without a chance to expand more on how we as authors perceived the sonic environment of the mall, the man continues: "If human ears cannot hear this way, why do you do it?" In response, I find myself mumbling something along the lines of unexpected impact on the viewers. The immediacy of the professional opinion suggested by the question is, however, stimulating.

Later, when I have a chance to talk to the man personally, David MacDougall expands on the issue and shares his reservations about the experimentation in Lucien Castaing-Taylor's elegiac poem "*Sweetgrass*" (IMDB 2009). Referring to the scene where the filmmaker is atop the summit and his subjects, a cowboy cursing the flock of sheep, down in the valley, he utters: "I see no point in wiring people up and being far away from them. It is unnatural." Is he warning us about misguided attempts to simulate bodily sensations which would be impossible without the sophisticated technological tools that permit this? Why does he feel a need to distance himself from the cinematic methods grounded in the approach he himself explored as a theoretician and practitioner of observational cinema?

Later, when MacDougall mentions that it is *the cinema of consciousness* that needs to be hailed as the pinnacle of the anthropological endeavor, I am reminded of the centrality of human experience he and his wife Judith have been trying to render throughout their careers. Subjected to the visions and voices of people with whom they have been collaborating, to the stance of humble observance and the ideal of habituated perception, they have committed themselves to the development of cinema as a space of social encounters and anthropology as a field dedicated to the exploration of the diverse ways by which humans are made human. In the following text, I will argue that judging certain practices of ethnographic filmmaking as "unnatural" overlooks the *modus operandi* of why sensory ethnographers employ them in the first place. Connecting the relatively arbitrary yet insightful anecdote about meeting David MacDougall at the Freiburg Film Forum to the main premises of observational cinema, I intend to pinpoint the paradigmatic limitations of this approach. Expanding on my recent filmmaking experience, I will outline the conceptual resources vital to the ethico-aesthetic project of sensory ethnography, and, finally, offer a modest proposition to link them with the ambitions of an emerging post-humanist cinema. To begin, I will venture back in time and re-explore the methodological apparatus my colleague and I have used in order to harness the *mallness* of the shopping mall.

ENTERING THE MALL

"What is the night time like in the mall once everyone leaves?" The question strongly resonated with me. I felt an immediate excitement nurtured by the image of having access to an unfamiliar place, of doing observations and walkthroughs, of being alone in the twilights and echoes of a silenced system. While working on an observational film assignment for "Directing Documentary," a class at Tallin University where I had been studying Audiovisual Ethnography, it was to the engagement with the indoor spaces and rhythms of employees' routines that I wanted to expose myself. In order to gain access, I approached six department stores in Tallin. Due to occasional grocery shopping the preference belonged to the one I knew the best - the most downtown, the most spacious and the newest in the city. When the so-called "church of the holy Vaino," a former political command of the country and the office of the first secretary of the Communist Party of Estonia, has been replaced by "the largest entertainment, trade and cultural centre in Tallinn" (AS Merko 2009), the monumental stone-made modernism of Sakala Keskus had to give way to light and flexible construction made of glass, steel and plywood. Regardless of the opinions oscillating along the lines of the aggressivity of profit-oriented public wealth privatization or the inevitability of post-socialist transformation (Hackmann 2009; Martínez 2014), the controversial demolition was approved by the city administration in 2006. Eventually, after eight years of negotiations, Solaris Centre was opened in October 2009. Since then it has accommodated a wide array of functions such as shopping mall, office space, food court, parking lot, roof terrace, cinema hall and concert hall. Converted into a luxury restaurant, the Sakala corner tower has remained the only tangible residue of a Communist history.

I spent fifteen nights in the building. First, doing observations without a camera, then executing a tentative shot-list, and, last, accompanying my colleague sonic ethnographer Kevin Molloy who I had invited to work on a soundscape. Once inside, having received relatively unrestricted access from the

FIGURE 1 - SAKALA KESKUS, 1985 (ARCH. RAINE KARP) (SOURCE: MUIS.EE/ MUSEAALVIEW/2644028)

FIGURE 2: SOLARIS KESKUS VISUALISATION, 2010 (ARCH. RAIVO PUUSEPP) (SOURCE: WWW.PUUSEPP.EE/?PORTFOLIO=2010-SOLARIS-SHOPPING-CENTRE)

management, we have been asking ourselves how we are to depict and juxtapose our feelings of outdoor public space, grocery store, atrium, staircases, cinemas, stores, parking lots and the building's rooftop. How are we to deal with employees and visitors, including ourselves? How could camera framing and the workings of microphones "fit" together? Observing ceilings with kilometers of exposed water tubes, or sitting in the THX-certified silence of the cinema hall, we have been puzzled by questions about what it is that we are looking at and what it is that we are listening to in this project. In other words, thinking as filmmaking storytellers and following a structuralist rationale, the pressing issue we found ourselves captivated by was how the sensorial glimpses of a gloaming mall can come together, transcending the chaos of sensations into a progressively evolving series of situations – a narrative, "a semiotic phenomenon that transcends disciplines and media" (Herman et al. 2005: 344). In other words, what's the story that we want to make about? As I elaborate later, such an initial reaction did not serve the framework with which we started.

Lacking an academic terminology for what we would like to achieve, I admit that the following theoretical pronouncements are, to a certain degree, merely a reflection of the iterative processes of crafting inside the building and of the self-critical contemplations we experienced from the first day to the very first film sceenings. What has started as me experiencing the indoor spaces through walking and observing by, to use the words of Sarah Pink (2009: 7), "physical engagements with the materiality and sensoriality," resulted in an attempt to subject Kevin and myself to the corporeal weight of the environment. As we did not want to encounter "the unknown," collect reflections of ourselves in the mirror of objects around us and serve it to the viewer as a ready-made statement, we have decided to challenge our mindsets which have been trained to look for cause-and-effect narratives and nurtured to tackle the issues akin to representational logic.

Such a direction was inspired by our discussion about how to engage with material culture discourse, an approach which advocates a more profound attention to the world of things and goes against the "tyranny of the subject" (Holbraad 2011: 3). This helped inform our cinematic intervention. Therefore, instead of thinking in terms of what a store, public space, or shopping mall is, we have tried to "place objects rather than concepts first" (Cubero 2013: 4) in the very act of filming. In other words, we needed to prevent ourselves from abstracting from the experience, to move away from thinking of *what* the place *is* and move closer to *how it is* (Merleau-Ponty 2005), instantaneously mediated through the act of recording.

The key aim was to depict human and non-human entities as the interacting elements equally contributing to the *mall-ness* of the space and to render the nocturnal site as it slips into a stand-by mode. Since the cinematic space and weight of its atmospheres was to offer "a horizon of expectations" (Gardies in Penz, 2012: 4), non-human qualities of the environment were to come out first in an unexpected, occasionally almost uncanny, way. Maintaining distance from supporting human characters and shopping mall workers, as well as observing in silence and employing tracking shots were not only tactics used to render the depth of surrounding corridors on screen, but, primarily, served as an attempt to block the empathetic relation viewers tend to make with other beings. By doing so, we present a glimpse into the routines of those who physically operate, yet simultaneously are being operated by, the predefined designs of the working place. Moreover, we believed the rushes that had been categorized during the post-production phase according to the dominating presence they might induce—camera operator, humans, non-humans and built environs--could, eventually, transpire to evoke *more-than-human* perspectives and embody a new sense of what the world of shopping malls might feel like.

As sound is never a purely acoustic element, but energy profoundly related to socioeconomic conditions, connecting with the shopping mall through sound was extremely important to us. Influenced by the writings of Michel Chion (1999: 5) and his notion of *vococentrism*, the assumption that the presence of the human voice "structures the sonic space that contains it," the soundscape of *Solaris* is dialogue-free, and free of explicit human-centered perspective. Consequently, the very process of turning off the building, a closure of publicly accessible private space, has become an invitation for the viewer to slow down, "unhumanize" a little and enter a state of extreme listening. Nonetheless, all customers are almost gone and the audience is left with a strange jellyfish floating in a water tank.

Heartening the senses, viewers are thrown into the blender of extreme close-ups of objects and wide fixed shots on the built environment. Finally, during the montage, we start to treat the film itself as a *perceptual object* (Merleau-Ponty 1964) which flashes out, attacks, and then draws viewers into the experience.

However, even if we, as researchers and filmmaking sensory ethnographers, succumbed to the belief that there is something valuable in getting closer to the inanimate structures, was it not to the dreams of its builders, translated into materials, designs, and procedures that we have been attuning ourselves? Was it not us foolishly trying to give up our individual agency over the creation of an art object, a sensory ethnography film? If so, what did we learn from it about ourselves and the aims of the anthropological endeavor?

In the next section, before we put *Solaris* into conversation with observational cinema, I will expand on the subject of mall experience as seen by contemporary scholars—both orientation and disorientation—and illuminate our post-fieldwork "hangover".

SOLARIS AS A POST-MODERNIST ABJECT

Once the production was done, I wrote the following lines in the Author's statement: "Its light burns right through my eyes. Apparently, my chances of becoming a big fan of shopping malls have never been high. However, getting older, I have realized it is not about the architecture or the perfection of daily shoppers, but rather my concern has shifted towards what it represents to me. A world of blissful ignorance, delivered packed and perfumed comfort from all around the world in an instant? A place where take-away happiness can be bought? I decided to confront that…" (Borecký 2015). Channeling the contempt into the Statement, was it me being unfaithful to the *how* approach we subjected ourselves to in the project? Where did such an interpretation come from and was it even possible to avoid it?

The number of urban thinkers, researchers of mall experience, who have never been "big fans" either is quite remarkable. In times of a booming international economy, crowd practice (Jameson, 1991), damnation to disorientation (Harvey 1989; Langman 1991), fetishistic consumption of commodities (Sennett 1994; Shields 1989), or notable condemnation of the mall as a postmodern simulacral place outside of history and identity, or "non-place" (Augé 1995; Baudrillard 1988; Soja 1989) these were the terms repeatedly illustrating the fatal power of the shopping mall over the agency of the individual. In this sense, the sad-but-true story of the builder of the first American malls in the 1950s pinpoints the persistent speculation that the design itself renders the centripetal logic of the capitalistic machine.

In the book *Centers for the Urban Environment* Victor Gruen (1973) presented his vision of a shopping mall as "an architectural panacea" helping to solve the problem of suburban labyrinth – the vicious circle of urban sprawl, motorization and separation of urban functions. Allowing Americans to leave their cars, stop being cut off from the city and from each other, the environmental, commercial and social issues were to be solved by one multifunctional building. Where the mall builder envisioned the liberation of human from machinic car-

oriented future and the concentration of people for the sake of community-building (and shopping), contemporary critics theorize "the classification on the basis of the observable characteristics of built form" (Woodward 2000: 340). In the urban studies terminology, "the Gruen effect" stands for a moment when consumers respond to "scripted disorientation" cues in the environment (Crawford 1992). Today, despite the growing scholarship that opposes consumption as "evil practice" (see, for instance, Daniel Miller's 1998 case on shopping as an act of love, thrift and sacrifice), Gruen's name represents recurrent suspicion leveled against shopping mall designs as an inherently simulacral prisons where one is to "get lost" and become a compulsive shopper.

However, in 2000, Ian Woodward's anthropological team carried out a sociological survey among shoppers across three distinct malls in the Queensland region of Australia. While contributing to the refutation of "the unsupported assertions about the disorienting effects of postmodern space" (Woodward 2000), the case study points in two directions significant for the argument. First, in order to support the claim that it is flawed to confuse Marxist theoretical appeal with empirical validity, researchers cite Nigel Thrift's observation made in "Geographies of Consumption" (Jackson and Thrift 1995: 341): "The picture of the mall as 'an essentially threatening presence able to bend consumers to its will' reflects the 'residual influence of Marxian political economy'."

Second, Woodward's team proposed an alternative way of researching spatial experience, the one I find useful to think with while crafting cinematic sensory ethnographies. Quoting the first urban phenomenologist Kevin Lynch (in Woodward 2000: 343), the author of the influential *Image of the City*, they propose a thorough practice-oriented exploration of everydayness through the prism of *wayfinding* as "the ability of people to comprehend physical space and to generate problem-solving strategies" (Lynch 1960). Coming back to the Author's statement, experiencing shopping environments for me in the past has never been associated just with a physical discomfort I wished to avoid.

Rather, I recognize now that it was the experience of physical discomfort itself that was influencing my views on concepts like the global economy, ecological sustainability, and Central European post-socialist momentum. In my text, infused with emotions, moral judgments, and a fair dose of irony, the building of a shopping mall serves as Saussurean signifier; an empty vehiculum standing as an epiphenomenon of perspective, formulated by Marxist critique, prior to the project of sensory ethnography itself. Would I be able to go beyond the search for language-driven narrative if one realized I had embedded contextual anchors directly within the film?

During the post-production stage I added Merleau-Ponty's "where are we to put the limit between the body and the world since the world is flesh" as the opening quote and "to all aban-

doned vessels of consumerism" as the closing dedication (from the author's film Website). As you can see, even during the editing stage, it has been difficult for me to bypass what Merleau-Ponty (1964: 49) calls an "attitude of analytical perception" and not offer a key to how to engage with and use the film, not to try to alleviate the anticipated sensory disorientation of a dialogue-free film by ideology-laden textual anchorage. Today, I think such a course of action is not only stimulated by a particular school of thought, but by my recurring concerns about questions of representation and, eventually, practices of scientific knowledge production itself. This impulse to eschew ambiguity, half-knowledge, and uncertainty is so rarely hailed in the world of academia, where to bring light into dark places is a noble goal everyone sets out to achieve.

Noticing that the post-modern mall somewhat prevented urban researchers from ironic, reflexive, and anarchistic types of movement known as *flânerie* and *dérive* advanced by Marxist writers Debord (1956), Benjamin (1983) or De Certeau (2011), opens up a new set of questions. Can and should anthropologists be free of an intellectual mindset in which a place, in our case a shopping mall, embodies first and foremost a specific nod created by the tradition critical of the totalitarian tendencies of capitalism? Is it viable, or even possible, to disregard the politics of perception in sensory ethnographic projects? Such a line of questioning can actually lead us down the transdisciplinary influences on and role of anthropology in the 21st century and cause us to ask: What do we aim to accomplish through our practices?

David MacDougall, in his book *Transcultural Cinema* (1998: 245), understands the key contribution of visual anthropology as: "the challenge that images and film pose to abstract cultural representations." When it comes back to the prolific urban thinkers, would it be any different if Augé, Sennett and Harvey resisted treating the mall as a post-modernist abject and employed the audiovisual methods of sensory ethnography? Would they face the same challenges as I did in communicating their cultural critique? Before I pose what cinematic sensory ethnographies aspire to offer, what intellectual resources they tap into, and how the metaphor of *wayfinding* and the Antropocene debate fit into the picture, I will briefly elucidate the history of anthropological cinema and the framework of observational style, the one that uses the "humanized camera" (Grimshaw 2001), operates in a primarily realist film model (Taylor 1996), and which has nowadays become a new "golden standard" of ethnographic cinema worldwide (comp. Banks 1992; Kiener 2006; Suhr and Willerslev 2012).

THE SHAPES OF HUMANISTIC CINEMA

"Our ears cannot hear this way." In a moment, I assume MacDougall might be suggesting this is not something worthwhile to be explored by anthropologists. It is just some frequency under or above the hearing range of humans, out of the scope of our perception.

What limits have we been touching here? As a prelude to the following section when we look into the ideas of perception and knowledge in visual anthropology, I suggest bearing in mind MacDougall's quote that "implicit in a camera style there is a theory of knowledge" (MacDougall 1998: 202).

To begin with a brief examination of the observational paradigm in visual anthropology, it is important to recognize that in foregrounding the issues of mind and body MacDougall and his collaborators contributed to a move away from the concept of the body as a transmitter/receiver of cultural knowledge (Lock 1993) and a "discursive object" (Turner 1994). Moreover, it is worth stressing that this happened before the introduction of practice theory (Bourdieu 1977; Ortner 1984) and following the rise of practice-oriented approaches. Yet despite the proliferation of more generative, inclusive, and human-centered research tactics, and the acknowledgement of the participatory character of knowledge creation, ever since the "writing culture" debate (Clifford and Marcus 1986), the shadow of the valid representation of a "cultural other" and the possibility of self-indulgent symbolic violence against the research participants has been eclipsing all contemporary anthropological endeavors.

In the field of visual anthropology, analogous concerns pertaining to the capacities of cinema have been debated intensively since the late 1960s. As MacDougall (2001: 88), one of the founders of the observational approach to filmmaking (UCLA), noted: "we wanted to replace the word-dominated structures of the illustrated lecture film and the all-knowing eye of Hollywood." In other words, we can see it as a response to the standardized form of anthropological film and as the formation of apparatus theory (comp. Baudry 1974; Metz 1974) which sees viewers as passive recipients. Thus, fitting the context of its time, liberating aspirations of filmmaking anthropologists were grounded in the conviction that film ought not to be understood as a carefully wrapped package of meanings or a self-contained, ready-made show, but rather as a more open-ended venture carried out by the participating viewer.

From the 1970s onwards, under the influence of observational reasoning, ethnographic filmmakers have been developing a distinguishable methodology and filmmaking style. It has been primarily evolving around the emotionally-invested filmmaker bonding with the main characters, the mimetic camera as "a physical extension of the camera's body," and a continuous montage of the *cinema of duration* (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009: 548). Techniques of montage that evoke discontinuity are dismissed as methods evoking an omniscient view (Suhr and Willerslev 2012) whereas human embodied consciousness, cinematic *becomings* and empathetic *perception-images*, as elaborated later, were to translate into the methodology of unprivileged filming of "normal human participants" (Henley 2004: 114). Finally, ethnographic filmmaking has been gaining momentum since the 1990s due to works such as *The Corporeal Image* (MacDougall 2006) which helped to establish the new canon worldwide.

Since there have been others who eloquently expanded on the history of observational cinema (comp. Henley 1996; MacDougall 2006; Grimshaw 2001, 2008, 2009), for the sake of argument, I only suggest that the stance against the simulation of an omnipresent view of the camera, commitment to empirical experience, and a profound belief that the sense of truth may be recaptured through the intersubjective encounter were the main premises guiding the adventures of observational filmmakers. Yet, what lies behind the methodology and its premises? I suggest a focus on the notions that, in my opinion, provide the approach with a solid human-centered footing—perspective, empathy, and immersion.

Looking at Perugino's fresco it is difficult not to be overwhelmed by the depths and magnitudes it offers to the viewer – seemingly infinite landscape on a horizon, monumental architecture animated by everyday life in the middle and unfolding Biblical scene with Christ handing the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven in front.

FIGURE 3 - PERUGINO: THE DELIVERY OF THE KEYS (C. 1481–1482) SISTINE CHAPEL, VATICAN CITY (SOURCE: UPLOAD.WIKIMEDIA.ORG/WIKIPEDIA/COMMONS/B/B4/ENTREGA_DE_LAS_LLAVES_ A_SAN_PEDRO_%28PERUGINO%29.JPG)

Due to the 13th-century invention of perspective and projective geometry, boundless domains of art and science were to accurately render what was observed in the world and, subsequently, introduce a fundamentally new concern: how a scene actually looks to a particular person from a particular point of view. What kind of knowledge has become implicitly communicated in works of art masterfully adapting to and exploring new techniques of depicting the world?

In contrast to Giotto, the first Renaissance master who composed his sacral relations of men and godly beings on the indigo background of a vertical plane, it is the perspectival landscape

of Perugino that opens horizontal depths to the imagination of self in relation to other earthly beings and, consequently, draws Western civilization towards modernity and Nietzsche's "death of God." It is symptomatic that the commitment to realism in art starts receding only with the invention of the photographic camera, yet it has been the performance of perspectival art objects contributing to a gradual process of affective "enskillment of vision" (Grasseni 2007) that underpinned the humanist Enlightenment project. To make a quick "jump cut," so to speak: in the post-World War-era of inalienable human rights, once cultural differences become the ever-present basis of politics and acknowledging someone's "point of view" is a matter of mutual respect, "the plurality of perspectives" is already firmly entrenched in language metaphors of everyday life.

What theory of knowledge is implicit in the observational camera style? Echoing Anna Grimshaw (2001), I speculate that it is primarily the thinking of entities, distances and relations grounded in the recognition of an "ultimately shared humanity." What finally helps observational filmmakers to render the premises of "cinematic encounter" into film projects is a recursive rethinking of positionality, human perception, and film reception along the lines of phenomenology and Deleuzian film theory. At this point, let us be reminded of these foundations.

For phenomenologists, beings endowed with life are always conscious of something in their presence. Thorsten Gieser, paraphrasing Heidegger (2008: 301-302), offers a tentative phenomenological explanation of consciousness: "being is never alone but always 'with' other beings… Our being is therefore neither located in ourselves as subjects nor in the objects we are dealing with, but in between, in our relationships with the world." In other words, there is no barrier between the *self* and the world as one is always-already-elsewhere.

Inevitably, observational filmmakers find themselves attracted to the corresponding film theory. In the book *Deleuze and Film* Tereza Rizzo (2012: 70) argues that for the French theorist "cinematic images have the potential to produce *becomings* with the viewer blurring the distinction between the object and the subject, the film and the viewer… (cinema) contains both perspectives in the same shot, so that the perspective of one is reflected in the other without merging with it." What follows is a Deleuzian theory of *perception-image* as the image producing a sense of being with other characters. Direct encounter with the "other" who is ultimately *self-in-becoming* is of the utmost importance for the humanizing mission of anthropology.

When Pink (2006: 134) envisions the future of visual anthropology, she concluded that the main goal of observational cinema is to enable viewer empathy so he or she "can achieve understanding through those human similarities that transcend culture." Listening to the explanations of ethnographic filmmakers around the world, I can confirm that the phenomenological position is widespread—due to the synergy of senses one can "get there" and experience empowerment through appropriation.

In this sense, MacDougall's recent writing (2015) is noteworthy. Whereas he revisits the theoretical description of the sense of proprioception, "the physical awareness we have of our own bodies" (Sherrington 1906: 5), and links it with the discovery of mirror neurons (Ramachandran 2010), he finally claims that if the sensations of a sensory environment in a film can be evoked through the experiences of film subjects, then, in effect, by watching film we actually share our proprioception with film subjects.

Consequently, evoking immersive associations with other human characters through empathy, "imaginative, at once emotional and cognitive, projection of oneself into the perspective or situation of another" (Hollan and Throop 2011: 5), thus becomes the pinnacle of observational filmmaking in visual anthropology. Since I assume the experienced filmmaker is aware that there is no such thing as non-mediated recording and that perception is a performative act, I deduce that David MacDougall's comment in Freiburg was mainly based on the conviction that without an orientation toward the cinematic mediation of human consciousness, the project of anthropological cinema would lose its power and influence.

Instead, as I intend to argue in this paper, visual anthropology with its contemporary theory of knowledge has reached the stage when the initial motivations, be it a struggle against lecture films, the "all-knowing" cinematic eye, and a human-centered focus, have slowly exhausted themselves. Coinciding with the success of hybrid genres of docufiction and mockumentary--implying the increasing film literacy among the audience--are new questions and challenges that ethnographic filmmakers need to face. In this article I propose that the mission of filmmaking anthropologists needs to revisit approaches that were suppressed during the purification era and enrich the paradigm by introducing new methodologies, while moving beyond the frame of human-centered cinematic evocations.

FIGURE 4 - KEVIN MOLLOY, SONIC ETHNOGRAPHER IN SOLARIS (2015) (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

More specifically, I will argue that these are the thresholds that sensory ethnographers, including our modest contribution of a short film on nighttime in a Tallin shopping mall, have already started inhabiting, thus rejuvenating the very observational tradition itself.

THROUGH THE LAND WHERE THINGS CAN SPEAK

First, let us remind ourselves of the epistemological uncertainties stemming from an encounter with an inanimate object that was to be rendered "on its own terms," and the fact that the mall might not be anything more than the tangible result of the creative agency of human builders. Isn't there an apparent paradox? Isn't the idea of the non-human perspective only wishful thinking, and a misguided anthropomorphism introduced by the authors?

To bypass the drawbacks of the question of what an accurate and reliable representation could be, and reach beyond the relics of social constructivism, human geographers Jamie Lorimer (2005) and Nigel Thrift (2008), inspired by Latourian "flat ontology," suggest a radical shift of the human-centered paradigm in the humanities. In the attempt to encompass diverse yet interrelated intellectual strands (actor-network theory, material culture studies, phenomenology and speculative realism most influential among them), non-representational theory has been envisioned as "an umbrella term for diverse work that seeks to better cope with our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multi-sensual worlds" (Lorimer 2005: 83). The subject matter of the research concerns itself with practices and performance, affective resonances, backgrounds and events as vital processes through which relations take place.

To outline the potential of the hybrid genre, while being anti-biographical and pre-individual, experimental, materialist and, preferably, body-oriented, Thrift (2008: 5) suggests that the first programmatic tenet is to "capture the on-flow of everyday life." If one is to recognize the syncretic character of the non-representative way of thinking and, gradually, to approximate its status as "the logical development of post-structuralist thought and the most notable intellectual force behind the turn away from cognition, symbolic meaning, and textuality" (Vannini 2015: 2), then one consequently enters a landscape in which the deeply entrenched Cartesian divide between body and mind, nature and culture, object and subject, has been challenged. In simple terms, the first architects of non-representative theory inspire us to look elsewhere, to feel differently. To forget memories that make us see what we have learned to see and instead embody the perceptions of a child, of fresh openness, of limitless curiosity, of fearless passion.

To draw conclusions significant to the *Solaris* project, it is fascinating that the same impulse was a recursive motive of the filmmaker-poet Andrei Tarkovsky. Inviting the filmmaker into the conversation, I need to admit that, since the original sci-fi

film *Solaris* addresses the limits of communication in proximity to a living planetary entity, exploring the *more-than-human* entanglements in the shopping mall sharing the same name intentionally adds an extra-diegetic interpretative layer I played with during the production phase. Next, what the admirer of Japanese haiku hails as a "precise observation of life," akin to the essential truth of cinema (repeatedly elucidated in his films), was the human weakness which "does not allow for individual expansionism, for the assertion of the personality at the expense of others or of life itself" (Tarkovsky 1987: 209). In my view, the filmmaker's fervor echoes the anxieties of post-humanism, a branch of cultural theory critical of the foundations of humanism and its legacy (Esposito 2011), one which seems to be unlimited by being confined to a particular discipline and, instead, marks a deeper ethico-aesthetic metamorphosis that Western science (namely, the humanities), is currently undergoing.

Bringing material discourse into the mix, shall we say that the mall could really "speak to us" as Martin Holbraad (2011: 4) suggests? According to him, there is an issue that goes untouched in the discourse on the rise of things, one central to the aims of sensory ethnography. As for how to widen the circle of the human and resist pits of positivism, the anthropologist distinguishes two stages on "the axis of radicalism" labeled as "humanist" and "post-humanist." Humanists, such as Danny Miller or Alfred Gell, seek to emancipate the "thing" in terms of "the ontological division between humans and things," i.e. emancipate things by association with humans, while post-humanists, here Latour, Ingold and Viveiros de Castro, would do so by going further and emancipating them in and of themselves, i.e., by "showing that they can radiate light for themselves" (Holbraad 2011: 4). The author (2011: 18) himself speculates that the "thing" must be de-theorized so it could "differentiate…*itself* no longer as an instantiation of a concept but self-transformation as a concept." To summarize the principal difference and to translate the lesson of the Russian filmmaker into the vocabulary of cultural studies, whereas for humanist-oriented materialists the epistemological tradition remains unchallenged, post-humanism frames a different ontology of both people and things which basically involves a profound redefinition of being in the world. However, how to make such a project attainable?

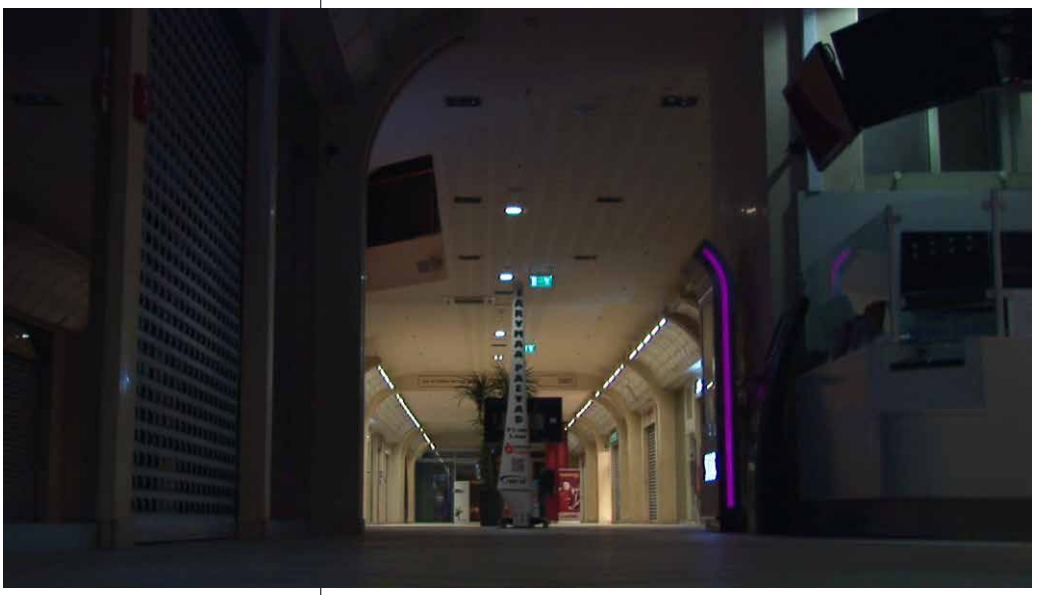
Here we have reached the land dominated by philosophical thought. I thus elucidate the notions of epistemology and ontology as they are seen from the like-minded outposts of speculative realism. In opposition to Kantian philosophy, in which the ontology of things is conceived in terms of "closure" and the epistemology of human beings to whom the world is predetermined by their minds, languages, and cultures, the contemporary philosophical movement insists on the primacy of "things," flattened subjects and objects, while recognizing alterity as a primordial phenomenon of gentleness (Levinas 1969). In this sense, the ontological question of what things are, cannot be reduced to the hegemonic human-centered focus on the epistemological cognition of "things."

Instead, *ontological realists* such as Brassier, Morton, Harman or Shaviro claim that, in order to "run away from traditional anthropocentrism and take the existence of non-human worlds seriously" (Shaviro 2014: 45), we need to speculate as children touching snow for the first time. We need to speculate about a profoundly suggestive proposition: a concept of the social that does not stop with the human community.

Taking the aforementioned schools of thought seriously and attempting the see links between them, I thus dare to speculate that non-representative theorizing strives to transcend the postmodern relationalism which, in its extreme, posits that the existence of things resides in their relations to other things.

As a consequence, when you (as viewer), me, and a jellyfish engage with the mall or perceive the film-object in cinema, the thing itself dissolves in the network of divergent perceptual relations.

FIGURE 5 - THE MAIN HALL OF SOLARIS KESKUS ("SOLARIS," FILM STILL, 2014) (SOURCE: AUTHOR)



Eventually, individuals and cultures melt into interpretative perspectives, because, to turn Susan Sontag's (1966) formulation on its head, the thing does not matter; rather, what matters it is what is said about the thing. On the contrary, forming non-representative methodologies posits that in order to move beyond fundamental constructivism, it would be fruitful to come back to the intellectual cross-road that led us to the nature/culture divide, humble ourselves before the dynamics of current ecological challenges, and open the conversation with inherently speculative practices developed in other domains of human activity.

What are anthropologists to share with the field of art? The scholarship examining the potential for the mutual enrichment of "makers" has grown in recent years (see Marcus and Myers 1995; Schneider and Wright 2010; and Ingold 2013).

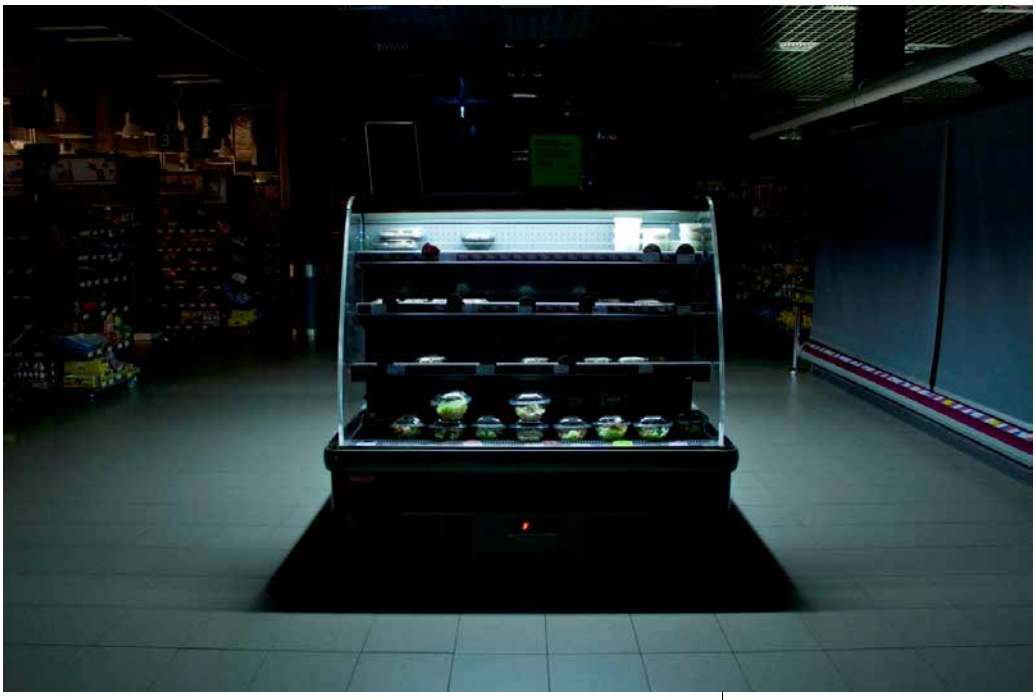


FIGURE 6 - "THE STORE" (AN EXCERPT OF PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION, MARIA AUA, 2015) (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

Where as Tim Ingold (2013: 73) argues that anthropology needs to aspire to a more generative rather than descriptive horizon and pinpoints the capacity of cultural makers of different sorts to catch "dreams and coaxing materials," editors of influential collections on art and anthropology have been consistently underlining the capacity of art to push the limits of moral and aesthetic values. More specifically, for Marcus (1995) the affinity of "discourse fields" concerned with culture and values prompts him to seek ways that art stimulates "cultural critique."

Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright (2010), meanwhile, locate the impact produced by an "aesthetics of estrangement" within dialectical aspects of the interplay between perceiver and perceived. I read these claims as calls for the future expansion of new transdisciplinary spaces where the anthropologist's skill at connecting individual practice to the wider social world, and the artist's motivation to make a re-generative impact on society, engender the use of diverse media through which the embodiment of implication-in-things and ethical action become both methods and aims. In terms of the argument put forth in my article, I recognize one overarching challenge that has already started to breach the shared ground.

Concluding this overview of recent developments in domains vital to the project of sensory ethnography, I pose a provocative question: Isn't it somewhat paradoxical to strive for the decentralization of the human ego and the ontological reconstitution of our being-in-the-world precisely at the height of the Great Acceleration, when a globalizing civilization has awakened to the Anthropocene era, a new geological epoch marked by the

fundamental influence of humans over planetary ecosystems (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Steffen et al. 2015)? Allow me to illustrate the subject with a question from Donna Haraway: "The *anthropos*—what is that? All of *Homo sapiens sapiens*? All of mankind? Fossil-fuel-burning humanity is the first short answer…[Anthropocene] would probably be better named the Capitalocene, if one wanted a single word" (Haraway in Davis and Turpin 2015: 259). Once the use of the negative *non-representative* label slowly shifts into that of the *more-than-representational* (Lorimer 2005) and the *more-than-human* (Tsing 2014; Whatmore 2006), it is the moment of the revival of ecosystemic approaches spearheaded by Bateson and Deleuze that feed into emerging multispecies methodologies. This moment coincides with the urge for an instigator of the new materialism to start doing the anthropology of the future while focusing on the ethics of possibility, the collective practice of imagination and a general reconstruction of the idea of the social (Appadurai 2013). Today, the overlapping contributions of geography, anthropology, and philosophy are the first responses to scholarship spanning arts, humanities, and natural science. This is the call that the methodologies and aspirations of visual anthropology need to acknowledge. Therefore, in spite of the possible reservations, this is the moment I feel compelled to ask: What challenges do these recent reconfigurations exposed by the debate pose to the dominant observational tradition in visual anthropology?

THE SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHY IN TIMES OF ANTHROPOCENE

When blindness abruptly entered the life of Professor John M. Hull, he felt it was not only his eyes losing sight, it was happening to his whole body. While reorganizing his sensorium, throughout the years John had to face the disappearance of visual images of his wife and closest friends. Fighting the loss of memory by clinging to nostalgia it was one of the most stressful periods in his life. However, one day John made the decision: "I have decided to let the memories go and live in now. I have decided to become a deep blind person and create a new world with tactile non-visual images" (Hull 1992: 159). Delivering the speech to the participants of the Serpentine Gallery's Memory Marathon he added: "Sighted people on a whole do not realize that they live in the world which is a projection of their sighted bodies. They think the sighted world is the world, therefore they think blind people must be without the world… To unite we need to discover wholeness through plurality. If we go too quickly to unity we finish up with the totality of the dominant, with the one world created by the powerful" (Hull 2013). It is as if I could hear a comment by multispecies ethnographers on the exclusionary centrality of humans, or, more specifically, Anna Tsing's accusation raised against Heidegger's phenomenological scholarship which posits that an animal cannot make the world because it has no language and no history.

Moreover, similar to how John was clinging to beloved memories, I was looking for familiar patterns while finding myself in the disappearing lights of the gloaming shopping mall. I found Marxist political economy and the anchoring quotes of Merleau-Ponty. In contrast to John, I was not brave enough to give myself fully to the embodiment of a non-representative and object-oriented attitude. However, struggling with disorientation, I fathom how the *how* approach of sensory ethnography initiated the enskillment of a special perceptivity that has much more to offer than I could possibly fathom in words.

Now, following the advice of ontological realists, I will risk stepping further into the land of speculation and continue tapping into the intellectual resources which may guide the posthumanist filmmaking project. I start by questioning the whole idea of perspective, saying it is cold as a tomb because it has been co-opted by the postmodern constructivist paradigm that suggests the world is created by competing representations. Even though the paradigm tends to generate a solid resource for relativizing the lures of totalitarian ideologies, it still reminds us of the anthropocentric world. Next, as has already become apparent I advocate for the suspicious approach towards externalized concepts ruling over the agency of an individual. Judging language and resulting ontic *meta-objects* (Rapport 1997) as some kind of evolutionary advantage over nature can be at once liberating, yet at the same time we need to be aware of the costs. The dominance of the human voice in a cinematic soundscape is only the notorious tip of an iceberg. Last, I cannot help but see the possibility of violence behind the notion of immersion through empathy and a conflict with Levinasian alterity one is to compelled to preserve. For instance, the definition of empathy coined by Carl Rogers (1975: 4) directly suggests that: "it involves entering the private perceptual world of the other." Rather, I side with Bubandt and Willerslev (2015), who recently rightly proposed that the ability to empathize can serve "darker" power-laden purposes. Is it viable to think of the limits of such a penetrative concept of empathy?

Drawing on the previous sections of this article, I believe that the fine and solid tree of the observational film has already started to grow new tender and pliant branches. They sprout from the non-representative strands of *becomings* without merging perspective and the materialist ontology of things as *radiating light for themselves*. While once the technological advancement of the 1960s allowed filmmakers to enter the lives of people and develop variations of an observational approach spearheaded by Rouch, Leacock or MacDougall, now it is the experimentation with miniature contact microphones and GoPro cameras that merges with the introduction of multispecies ethnography, the growing awareness of a damaged planet and the rejuvenating fields of art and anthropology; the attempts to pay attention to what has been backgrounded, yet always present. Even though one could classify the work of observational cinema as inherently humanistic, i.e. falling into Holbraad's

category of projects who strive to "emancipate things by association with humans," it has been David MacDougall who has pointed in the direction he, however, has not been willing to advance cinematographically.

At the conference "The Challenge of Atmospheres" MacDougall (2015) advocated for a "cinema of proximity." Drawing on a difference between the long-range and close-range vision of art historian Aloïs Riegl (Riegl in Deleuze 1987), the author suggests entering "tactile space," the ability of vision to evoke sensations of touch which are attainable only within the close-range sphere. This tactic was used while exploring an elite boarding school in India and the phenomena was described as social aesthetics: "the specific combination of rituals, customs, colours, textures, and physical surroundings that peculiarly defined the school" (MacDougall 2015: 2). The solution to the problem of how to film an elusive and ever-present phenomenon of social aesthetics, the school's distinctive atmosphere, was to recall the subjective experience of school students while closely examining their daily life (MacDougall 2015). Following the empathetic approach, it is the experience of being a student that renders the environment. For the emergence of post-humanist cinema, it is, however, essential to draw a bit different conclusion from Riegl, rethink and expand the sphere of aesthetics, and continue further.

First, to start seeing contours of post-humanist cinema, I suggest we need to escape the notion of aesthetics as a matter of beauty or art; the judgmental discipline shaped by the orientation to communication and the resulting dominance of semiotics. The path inspired by phenomenology and fueled by the sensuous shift in the humanities was proposed by Gernot Böhme, who argued for new aesthetics as concerned with "the relation between environmental qualities and human states" (Böhme 1993). The expanding sphere of aesthetics is to overcome the subjective-objective dichotomy by encompassing the shared reality of the perceiver and the perceived within the relational idea of the atmosphere.

Second, it is worthwhile to liberate the notion of atmosphere in film theory from its vague use. While pointing to the "halo, atmosphere or nimbus," Böhme (1993: 117) credits Walter Benjamin for "opening a new dimension of art theory." However, to Benjamin "the aural effect," something happening in a presence of aesthetic objects, possessed an environmental origin since it was derived from observations of himself and natural landscapes: "the experience of aura…[has] a certain natural impression or mood as background and certain receptivity in the observer." Aura, then, flows forth in a spatial manner.

In my opinion, it could be aesthetics, a domain neglected and ridiculed by ethnographic filmmakers (Weinberger 1992), now theorized as "a sphere of causality" (Morton 2013) and atmospheres as "the primary 'subjects' of perception… by means of which environmental qualities and human states are related" (Böhme 1993: 179) that opens a new terrain of sensuousness to the post-humanist cinema.

Third, an important cornerstone of the new aesthetics is that of the revision of emotions as a person's imminent being-in-the-world. As I have briefly described in the section on observational film, to Heidegger (1993: 179) what is often felt as an "atmosphere" one can enter, is not a purely inner state but a mood resulting from "a context of involvements." As long as we allow ourselves to think of perception not as a sum of stimuli but, simultaneously, the variation of relations with "others" and emotions existing in the gesture (Merleau-Ponty 2005), we could start tuning ourselves to experiences of sensory ethnographies as *wayfinding* ventures akin to the *raw moments* described by Kirsten Hastrup (2010: 205); moments when "thought, emotion and action unite in a singular experience of the boundaries between the self and the environment." It would strike a challenge to current theories of causality that have replaced moments of mystery with demystification, understanding, and knowledge, and represent a leap of faith into the uncharted terrain of *more-than-human* worlds.

Given the consistent attempts to crystallize post-humanist theories and refurbish aesthetics as a plateau from which to embark on *more-than-human* projects, I propose that there is something promising in spatial metaphors. Growing out of the ecosophical practice of Gilles Deleuze and his notion of *territory* as a distance between two beings (2004), this could enhance thinking about perspective in a wider, more nuanced, and more respectful way, a looking and listening as if gently touching not for the sake of penetrative immersion but rather for the ethico-aesthetic act of *witnessing without distance* (Ruyer 1952). This is the way sensory ethnographic film might act upon the viewer: rather than representing the subject, the film would have a bio-political dimension. On this matter I refer to the explication of Allana Thain (2015: 42) in the special edition of *Leviathan* (IMDB, 2012): "the tactic of sensory ethnography refuses the corrective distancing from sensation as a way of knowing the world, [rather] proposing an immanent alternative to the politics of representation through the ethico-aesthetic experience." What films such as *Sweetgrass*, *Leviathan*, and *Solaris* exemplify through the rejection of language-driven human-centered narrative, is an anthropology allowing for a politics not bound to colonization by one particular message and filmic perspective. Instead of merging and exploiting each other, they proceed along and look in the same dimension.

In conclusion, where MacDougall argues "close-range" for the sake of a human-centered exploration of social aesthetics, I claim that the ethico-aesthetic project of sensory ethnography is the practice of elaborating atmospheres in an attempt to reframe a human-centered window. In this sense, hyper-realist enhancements of seeing and hearing serve as an invitation to revisit the confidence of civilized humanity.

Presenting my personal experience as a justification of the argument, I gradually realize that being surrounded by the sudden chaos of non-human resonance provides an experience that tends to complement human vision with new *becomings*.

The question of how one directs and uses such potential of constant doing and reshaping (Ingold 2013) and perpetual readiness to rewrite the narrative (Bruner 1990), however, remains.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have reflected upon the experience of doing a sensory ethnography of a Tallinn shopping mall; the first encounter with a project on post-humanism and related schools of thought. The personal journey has been eclipsed by the continual learning curve that spans from the initial moments of ingenuous fascination by the subject to the film's reception at anthropological festivals where I have had the chance to contribute. As the phases of reading, filmmaking and analyzing can be hardly separated, the structure of the text respects this syncretic developmental logic and remains largely open-ended, since I am aware it has been the encounter that cannot be easily translated into cognitive schemes.

Although it has been difficult for me to resist the agency of Marxist tradition and post-modern conceptualizations, their presence needs to be acknowledged and creatively acted upon because they have become historical meta-objects with the intention to structure the *mallness* of the shopping mall I have attempted to render. However, even if it might be partly attributed to stress, tiredness or temporary sensory deprivation, the initial disorientation combined with the closeness to the materiality of the gloaming building gave birth to the development of a special perceptivity towards the man-made environment. Judging by the first reactions of the audience, I am convinced that *Solaris* encapsulates echoes of this subtle transformation. Furthermore, the sincere tuning to the resonances of atmospheres in the building via tactics of the *how* approach led to the subsequent examination of the notions of perspective, immersion and empathy as they guide the current project of observational cinema.

I recognize that the observational style is a vital and well-established approach which has greatly enriched the methodological repertoire of anthropological film as well as the history of cinema in general. It is guaranteed it will continue to influence future generations of storytellers, yet I claim there has been an awakening of imagination that goes beyond the human-centered realism it encourages. Instead of the consistency of a subjective point of view and the reserved style of cinematographic montage that have been sought after as viable solutions to emancipating viewers and their empathetic association with human characters, the recent works of sensory ethnography filmmakers has incited instead the bliss of losing a viewpoint, experimentation with the immersiveness of aural experience and a meticulously forward-looking attention to where life goes next.

This approach does not necessarily repudiate human consciousness *en bloc*, especially given the involvement of human

beings in the very production itself, yet, it attempts to raise awareness towards *more-than-human* realities through direct ontology and its experimental embedment in the filmmaking style itself.

As I have guided you into the lands of thought where I expect to find intellectual resources valuable for the post-humanist project – phenomenology, non-representative theory, speculative realism and art, I evoke the notions that have the potential to complement the premises of observational filmmakers and stimulate our imagination towards *more-than-human* worlds. The single most significant one is the axiom of shared reality of the perceiver and the perceived within the relational idea of the atmosphere as a means through which environmental qualities and human states are related. What follows it is the argument that doing sensory ethnography is the practice of elaboration of atmospheres in an attempt to reframe a human-centered window. It is based on a firm conviction that the cinematic assemblage might possess the capacity to transcend the way we relate to the world of things, flattened subjects and objects, and let them figuratively speak on their own through the workings of atmosphere.

At this point of our journey I need to conclude that the inception of a speculative imagination necessary for such a project cannot be solely attributed to technological advances, nor to the development of hybrid genres of docufiction or mockumentary. I rather situate its strongest sources within the domain of new non-judgmental aesthetics and post-humanist paradigms catalyzed by the debates on the Great Acceleration. Operating in this context, sensory ethnography becomes the ethico-aesthetic project that serves the aspirations of post-humanism, calling for deeper ecological sensitivity and profound ontological reconstitution of what it means to be human. Growing out of the understanding that it is industrialized humanity that needs to adapt to the new geological era, the emancipation of post-humanist cinema shall only be a matter of time, effort, and concentrated focus on the educational impact such films can bring about.

It used to be that observational cinema attempted to challenge the fear of otherness through empathy. Now it could become sensory ethnography that addresses the consequences of the nature/culture divide and expands the idea of the social that does not stop with the human community. Building upon the brief yet intense experience with this approach, I am positive this journey toward a more robust sociality would be a worthwhile one.

Finally, I would like to present a personal wish. Since it is the very pliancy of being and the elusiveness of our imagination that needs to thrive, let us be cautious of the conclusions and principles we draw. May humans not rush too fast from disorienting darkness toward the light of things.

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