

The Word-less Rhetoric of Leviathan: Observational Ethos in the Digital Age



Pearce Durst
Assistant Professor, Department of English
University of Montevallo
tdurst@montevallo.edu

“But if his eyes were broad as the lens of Herschel’s great telescope; and his ears capacious as the porches of cathedrals; would that make him any longer of sight, or sharper of hearing? Not at all.—Why then do you try to ‘enlarge your mind? Subtilise it.”

Herman Melville, “Moby Dick”¹

Just as Melville challenges our perspective by amending our typical desire to see breadth at the expense of depth, *Leviathan* (2012)² projects a world with the lens of a microscope and not a telescope. In media res, the film zooms in on the sloshing sea. Fish squelch as their bodies bounce like rubber against a steel vat. Machines grind and whirl in the forefront, almost indistinguishable from the backdrop of the crashing sea. There are humans moving through this hazy mosaic of black sky and bright boat lights, lugging nets and chains. Their language is inaudible, just another instrument in this briny orchestra of death and life. We are on a ship-deck at night; the only light is an industrial fluorescence hanging heavy overhead. At times this world is cold, grey, and wet. In others, beauty emerges alongside iridescent starfish floating in suspended animation through the brackish water. But no matter where the camera is positioned or the moment being captured, it is evident that we are witnessing a microcosm of something much larger.



Photo credit: <http://callaghanc.deviantart.com/art/Tiny-Starfish-209627259>

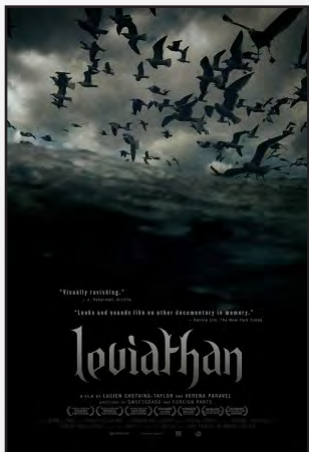


Photo credit: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Leviathan_poster.jpg

These lingering images from *Leviathan* ponder the greater significance of watching the minutiae of an 80-foot industrial fishing boat heading out of New Bedford, Massachusetts. Meaning is only visually and sonically implied and never verbally explicit. This is atypical for documentary films, but herein lies the agency within this kind of word-less artifact. Since *Leviathan* is devoid of narration or dialogue, what it provides is a canvas for the abstract and nonlinear depiction of an industrial fishing trawler and all the implications found therein. The direction for this film comes from the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University from the lenses of two filmmakers Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel. Some critics like John Hartl are spellbound by “The mixture of arresting images and carefully chosen sounds.”³ Others like Stephanie Zacharek criticize how “digression and open-endedness can take you only so far,” and that the film crosses the line “between showing reality and milking it for art’s sake.”⁴ No matter what your opinion may be, this experimental style of documentary creates unique and powerful rhetorical affordances worth extrapolating.

While the majority of audiences may not come into contact with the filmmaker’s official plot synopsis, it does help to establish the grounds of the film as an “immersive portrait of the contemporary commercial fishing industry.” Furthermore, “instead of romanticizing the labor or partaking in the longstanding tradition of turning fisherfolk into images, [the] filmmakers... present a vivid, almost-kaleidoscopic representation of the work, the sea, the machinery and the players, both human and marine.”⁵ The [official trailer](#) identifies its focus on New Bedford, and

See the official trailer for
Leviathan
<https://vimeo.com/58995554>



Photo credit: By Stephen F. Adams [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

establishes its ethos through various awards won at film festivals, specific praise from critics, and highlights key visual moments. With this in mind, consider what film critic A.O. Scott claims about *Leviathan*: “Not that the filmmakers are pushing a vegetarian or environmentalist point of view. They are trying, instead, to take in the details and rhythms of life and death at sea without ideas or preconceptions.”⁶ While the film largely manages to maintain eighty-seven minutes of experiential data “without ideas or preconceptions,” and not a film that becomes a Rorschach test where various meanings can be read from the same set

of images. Rather, the film is a “negotiation between filmmaker and reality,”⁷ and in this particular negotiation verbal intervention is resisted so that images can speak on their own.

Inherent within its form, “In terms of promoting social change, documentary film remains one of the most effective ways to enhance understanding on a mass level. Nothing else can so fully reveal one part of the world to another.”⁸ Through qualitative characterizations of its subject matter, *Leviathan* enhances understanding while simultaneously resisting clearly plotted beginnings/endings, causality, formal coherence, or direct continuity. It illustrates an aesthetic of discontinuity that is critical, challenging, open-ended, fragmented, polyphonic, disruptive, and harsh. It embodies a constructivist ontology capable of promoting social change and enhancing personal understandings of the industrial fishing industry. While the vision it provides would have been unrealizable with unwieldy reel-to-reel camcorders, it is not just lightweight Go-Pro cameras or digital technology that creates new rhetorical means, but the way in which *Leviathan* saliently navigates these new possibilities that commands deeper consideration.

The Rhetoric of Observational Documentaries: Editing, Image, and Sound Construction

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then it can be said that the filmmakers of *Leviathan* give audiences images of verbose proportions. The film starts with fishermen who are juxtaposed on equal footing alongside dead fish sliding into ocean waves. The cameras seem more interested in the backlit night birds cawing overhead than the humans on deck. According to the directors, however, this camerawork allows for “the spectator [to] rethink humanity’s relationship to nature, in relationship to a plethora of other beings, of other animals, of other kind of inanimate objects—the elements, the earth, the sky, the sea, the boat, mechanization, fish, crustaceans, starfish—everything that is involved in the ecology of what’s going on in industrial fishing today.”⁹ To be clear, no articulation of this or any kind is given in the film itself even after ten, thirty, sixty, and ultimately eighty-seven minutes. Floating among the imagery of gutted and dying fish, there is an inescapable dystopia made ever-present by the industrial hum. While there are also fleeting moments of intense beauty, audiences are left to subjectively infer what these observations mean—if indeed they mean anything at all.

Leviathan adopts a style that attempts to capture an objective reality, where the filmmaker functions as a neutral observer hidden



Photo credit: Kim Dietrich, NMFS, via http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seabirds_longlinersm.jpg

behind the camera, neither changing nor influencing the events being captured. Bill Nichols defines this “observational mode” of documentary films in relation to Cinema Verite, or direct cinema, which emerged in the late 1950s. *Leviathan* abides by the conventions of this mode by relying on rough, shaky, often amateur-looking footage that is void of staged pretensions. Reality is observed the way security guards watch surveillance cameras, that is, voyeuristically spying on the deck being cleansed of its bloody detritus, a worker taking a shower, fishes gulping and gasping for air, among many other occurrences. Small and lightweight high-definition cameras are not only attached to the boat, but to people and to poles that at times are submerged in water. This leads Gary Goldstein to criticize the “super-long takes unworthy of their subjects,” and to lament that “There’s also no dialogue or point of view; no identification of the fishermen, their location, their schedule or even the types of fish being caught.”¹⁰ If such elements would have been identified, however, its distinct impartial and “observational mode” of documentation would have been abandoned.



Photo Credit: Amanda at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/pinprick/>

One of *Leviathan*’s principle means of commentary is its use of “editing to enhance the impression of lived or real time. In its purest form, [the observational mode avoids] voice-over commentary, music external to the observed scene, intertitles, reenactments, and even interviews are completely eschewed.”

¹¹ Bypassing many of the tools commonly adopted by filmmakers, *Leviathan* remains strictly observational. It more narrowly relies on the fact that “the meaning of the individual shots can be largely determined by the editing, rather than by the intrinsic meanings of the shots”¹² In other words, the filmmakers influence the interpretive process through their editing decisions. It is worth pondering the choice that the filmmakers of *Leviathan* make to include as much as exclude the unused two-hundred and fifty hours of footage for their ninety minute movie. To what extent they edited images and sounds in the film remains unknown to viewers, as well as why the twelve GoPro cameras used to capture the images were positioned accordingly. Surely other films strongly depend on editing to convey meaning,

but few documentarians completely remove other narrative elements. Instead of deriving meaning from verbal language or dialogue, meaning is found latent between the lines of each edited sequence. Another way to frame the importance of editing is to consider how the only textual presence in the film is a subtitled opening quote from the book of Job.¹³ The only comprehensible auditory moments come from the workers watching a TV commercial that promises an end to constipation as well as the show *The Biggest Catch*. With the garbled exchanges between the men being inaudible at best, the lack of dialogue lends itself to the accurate description as a word-less film.

Even more basic than film editing, *Leviathan* exploits a word-less appeal that is fundamental to the rhetorical nature of images. Roland Barthes defines this “special status of the photographic image: it is a message without a code.” Extending this insight to



Photo Credit: By U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

other mediums, Barthes continues by asking if “there are other messages without a code? At first sight, yes: precisely the whole range of analogical reproductions of reality—drawings, painting, cinema, theatre. However, each of those messages develops in an immediate and obvious way a supplementary message...which is what is commonly called the style of the reproduction.”¹⁴ What he means is not that we lack the language (or code) to describe the images we see, but only that this language is subjective or connotative in nature. The words used to describe an image are not intrinsic to the image itself. They cannot be objective or denotative because they necessarily reside outside the image. The rhetoric of the image that Barthes defines is what Leviathan finesses. It establishes a space for mediation, where interpretations and opinions can bloom.

Sonja Foss extrapolates on the nature of symbolic interpretation when she says that “a tree standing in a forest is not a symbol. It does not stand for something else; it simply is a tree.”¹⁵ In other words, the tree alone in the forest is simply a tree; it is the humans’ interaction with the tree that makes it symbolic like the way an Evergreen tree translates to Christmas, the winter solstice, or any number of symbolic representations. Similarly we might say that the immersive experience of Leviathan is like a moment in time independent from the binds of preconceived linguistic connections, as if attempting to be the lone tree in the forest. It asks us to witness this fishing trawler “without ideas or preconceptions,” and from there it lets the mind reel. This reliance on stark images to represent reality with as little interference as possible is articulated by Benson and Anderson, who write on the noted documentarian Frederick Wiseman, a key practitioner of the observational mode of filmmaking:



Photo credit: By : Photographer: Captain Robert A. Pawlowski, NOAA Corps (Fisheries Collection, Image ID: fish0012) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Wiseman takes advantage of the conventions of cinema verite to create a sense that we are observing social reality. The photographic surfaces of the film bespeak an atmosphere of naturally occurring behavior. There are no actors, no special lights, no enormous film crews. The feel of actuality is present as a condition of the recording of the images. The whole film feels open and observational.¹⁶

Likewise, Leviathan’s message about the natural world remains indeterminate or implicit beneath the film’s visual landscape and word-less soundscape. Audiences witness images without words or external narrative elements to define them—like signs that hold no symbolic intention. Moreover, the overt directness of these images allow filmmakers to mask “the work of production, the effects of the cinematic apparatus itself, and the tangible process of enunciation.” This forges a resilient representational fidelity where the unobtrusive and indirect nature of what is recorded as well as what is refrained defines an ethnographic, “empathetic, nonjudgmental, participatory mode of observation.”¹⁷



Photo credit: By : By C. Ortiz Rojas (<http://www.photolib.noaa.gov/htmls/fish2172.htm>) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

The observational mode of documentary filmmaking, as it has been described so far, relies on carefully selected and edited moving images. Subsequently, audiences attempt to construct and attach meaning and coherence to them—like shadows flickering in Plato’s cave—in order to produce “the referential illusion” that the documentary “derives its prestige from.”¹⁸ Stated a different way, without words or dialogue, Leviathan’s word-less persuasion seems at first to tell a parable about overfishing, but from another angle it’s about animal rights, environmental tragedies, ecological catastrophes, the dangers of anthropomorphism, etc. All of these interpretations can co-exist simultaneously because images are edited

together with equal weight and validity as word-less realities. In this way, as Nichols notes, “The difficulty with visual images is more often that there is any number of possible interpretations, and there is no way to determine which of them was intended or indeed if any particular one of them was intended, and this phenomenon is properly termed vagueness, not ambiguity.”¹⁹ Vaguely flickering in a phantasmagoria of images, reality seems veiled just on the periphery.

Perhaps even more fundamental than carefully selected images edited with rhetorical precision is Leviathan’s reliance on how “documentary scenes are more heavily organized around the principle of sound.”²⁰ Industrial fishing paradoxically feels more germane through a mélange of vague and often indecipherable images because of the accompanying auditory torrent. The most constitutive element responsible for the film’s ambience is its unrelenting noise ([click to hear the opening 3:00 minutes of Leviathan](#)): Bill Staments acknowledges that “Ernst Karel’s discordant sound design hit[s] your eye, ear and gut;”



²¹ Goldstein hears the “vibrant barrage of boat and sea sounds, captured above ground and underwater, to keep viewers awake;”²² Nehme addresses the “deafening boat engine on much of the soundtrack;”²³ and Peter Howell feels that the “raw images and natural sounds creates a briny immersive effect that is almost hallucinatory.”²⁴ This synesthesia is not an afterthought, but constitutive of the film’s rhetoric. While the soundtrack is only one variable contributing to the ecology of the film, it principally helps to reveal its affective rhetoric.



Photo credit: <http://www.photolib.noaa.gov/bigs/fish0195.jpg> via http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Setting_a_trawl_in_Stephens_Passage,_Alaska.jpg

As a whole, removing the guidance of any spoken commentary while relying on vague images and harsh sounds helps “to construct an imaginary continuity and coherence between a subject of address and a signified real – a continuity and coherence in which not only the work of the sign but also the effects of power of a particular regimen are elided.”²⁵ Without commentary, a sensory mirror is held up to the industrial fishing industry. In this regard Leviathan functions as a constructivist document, which is to say that it allows viewers to generate knowledge and meaning from the interaction between the cinematic experience and their preconceptions.

Leviathan’s observational mode can best be defined in contrast to documentary films adopting the “poetic mode.” Koyaanisqatsi (1982),²⁶ Baraka (1992),²⁷ and Samsara (2012),²⁸ is a three-part series directed by Ron Fricke and/or Godfrey Reggio. In these films, there is a similar creation of space for various persuasions to exist simultaneously. While somewhat employing an observational ethos, the “poetic mode” sacrifices “the conventions of continuity editing and the sense of a very specific location in time and place that follows from it to explore associations and patterns that involve temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions.”²⁹ The poetic mode moves away from the sense of an “objective” reality of one given situation in order to grasp an inner subjective truth that can only be arrived at through poetic meditations. While Leviathan explores poetic and formal “associations and patterns,” and necessarily reveals the subjective nature of symbols, it can more accurately be described as observational due to its appeal to objectivity.

Just as “[t]he observational mode of representation arose, in part, from the availability of mobile 16mm cameras and magnetic tape recorders,”³⁰ digital technology signals new currents for the future of the observational mode. By uniquely employing this technology—in the form of lightweight and easily accessible GoPro cameras—Leviathan creates a critically self-aware aesthetic



of discontinuity that might incite social awareness, and potentially spur greater consideration of any number of policies surrounding the industrial fishing industry. While technological advancement allows for the freedom to choose where and what to film, as well as greater spontaneity voiding the necessity of a script, *Leviathan* remains characteristic of nonfiction films, which assumes that events exist outside of their representation. That is to say that the film retains familiar documentary ends, yet it accomplishes these aims through experimental rhetorical means that are polyphonic, critical, and open-ended. In this way, *Leviathan* prompts viewers to question how every observation of the social, historic, or natural world is a rhetorical negotiation.



Photo credit: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AGangions_used_in_salmon_longlining.jpg

Conclusion

Leviathan is one of many films that camouflages the filmmakers, perhaps even limiting their involvement to the pre-filming setup and post-production editing, but at the same it reveals new rhetorical possibilities through its use of digital technology. It reveals how the process of recording the social, historical, or natural world is always evolving. With more and more digital cameras on cell phones capturing any number of observational moments, there is greater concern for what counts as an indirect intrusion, what it means to provide proper context, and when/how consent and collaboration should take place. In relation to *Leviathan*, does watching the slaughter of fish make us willing participants and not just “observers” of the industrial fishing industry? Can we trust that what we see would have occurred if the cameras would not have been present? Since digital technology allows for easy distribution of video content—YouTube is a panoply of “observational” visual rhetoric—greater consideration should be given to what it means to observe and capture events as a “fly on the wall.” *Leviathan* can help in this effort to the extent that it illustrates what is rhetorically at stake when viewers are called on “to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done.”³¹



Photo credit: By Glen Fergus (Own work, Stewart Island, New Zealand) [CC BY 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

As outlined in this essay, *Leviathan*'s use of digital technology furthers observational ethos. The purity of its wordlessly edited images and sounds is somewhat new, while also exploitative of the familiar “pleasure and appeal” of documentary film, which is “to make us see timely issues in need of attention.”³² Whether every viewer sees it or not, this vision is fully realized; it is not too difficult to ascertain numerous arguments emerging from its intentionally edited images and sounds. They are left as buried treasure, and in this way *Leviathan* illustrates Melville's opening quote. Both call on us to renegotiate perspective and to see and to hear at more subtle frequencies. They call on us to experience one situation from as many different perspectives as possible. They challenge our eyes and ears to experience life as objectively as possible before coming to a conclusion. They urge us to truly hear, to unrelentingly see, and to respond in ways that previously would have been impossible. It is the forging of these persuasive measures that open the world to new possibilities.

(Endnotes)

- ¹ Herman Melville, and Tony Tanner. *Moby Dick*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- ² *Leviathan*. Directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Verena Paravel. New York: Cinema Guild 2012.
- ³ John Hartl, "'Leviathan': a striking dive into life at sea." *Seattle Times*. April 4, 2013.
- ⁴ Stephanie Zacharek, "'Leviathan': Of Fish And Men, Without Chats." NPR. February 28, 2013.
- ⁵ "Leviathan." <http://www.arretetocinema.org/leviathan/> Accessed: June 21, 2014.
- ⁶ A.O. Scott. "Or Would You Rather Be a Fish? 'Leviathan' From Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V er ena Paravel." *The New York Times*. February 28, 2013.
- ⁷ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*. (London: Routledge, 2006)
- ⁸ Betsy A. McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film: Second Edition*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012)
- ⁹ Pat Dowell, "'Leviathan': The Fishing Life, From 360 Degrees". NPR. March 16, 2013.
- ¹⁰ Gary Goldstein, "Movie review: 'Leviathan' casts wide net to show fishermen at sea" *LA Times*. May 9, 2013.
- ¹¹ Bill Nichols. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992)
- ¹² Gunther R. Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. (London: Routledge, 2006)
- ¹³ Job 41:31-33 "He maketh the deep to boil like a pot: He maketh the sea like a pot of ointment. He maketh a path to shine after him; one would think the deep to be hoary. Upon earth there is not his like, who is made without fear." King James Bible.
- ¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978)
- ¹⁵ Sonja K. Foss. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Waveland, 2008.
- ¹⁶ Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson. *Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman*. (Carbondale: SIU Press, 1989)
- ¹⁷ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 42.
- ¹⁸ William Guynn. *A Cinema of Nonfiction*. (Rutherford, NK: Fairleigh Dickinson U Press, 1990)
- ¹⁹ Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers. *Defining Visual Rhetorics*. (London: Routledge, 2012)
- ²⁰ Nichols. *Representing Reality*, 19.
- ²¹ Bill Stamets. "'Leviathan' immerses viewers in the wonders of the sea." *Chicago Sun-Times*. May 15, 2013
- ²² Gary Goldstein, "Movie review: 'Leviathan' casts wide net to show fishermen at sea" *LA Times*. May 9, 2013.

- ²³ Farran Smith Nehme. "'Leviathan' review." *NYPost.com*. March 1, 2013.
- ²⁴ Peter Howell. "Leviathan a fish-eye view aboard a commercial trawler: review." *TheStar.com*. March 14, 2013.
- ²⁵ Tagg, J. *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning*. (Chicago: University of Minnesota Press, 2009)
- ²⁶ *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance*. Directed by Godfrey Reggio. Institute for Regional Education, 1982.
- ²⁷ *Baraka*. Directed by Ron Fricke. Orland Park, Ill.: MPI Home Video, 2001.
- ²⁸ *Samsara*. Directed by Ron Fricke. Magidson Films, 2011.
- ²⁹ Bill Nichols. *Introduction to Documentary*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001)
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.
- ³¹ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 111.
- ³² Nichols, *Representing Reality*, ix.