In Search of Ambiguity

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The making of time-based media, regardless of genre or style, entails an essential distinction and dependence between the moment of recording and that of the footage's synthesis. The former is comparatively open-ended (and, at times, unstructured) while the latter reduces and concentrates diverse elements. Although filmmaking involves organization, films regularly blend specificity and ambiguity, as weavers interlace yarns meant for softness and structure. As Marcel Hanoun (2001) once wrote, 'The filmmaker should only show that which he does not yet know' (p. 30), a statement of cinema's function as a process of discovery as well as an argument for withholding elements of a depiction as an aesthetic or conceptual goal. Such tendencies are innately present in documentary, which delivers to the greatest extent on cinema's indexical promise, its direct reference to the recorded encounter. Documentary makers regularly preserve an element of the unknown that is inherent in experience, which contributes in turn to the ambiguous dimension in the work that we produce.

The first part of Peter Handke's novella, *Slow Homecoming* (1979), follows a geologist named Valentin Sorger, whose scientific perspective on natural phenomena has begun to give way to an avowedly aesthetic appreciation of his surroundings alongside a river in Alaska. This simultaneous recourse to his senses and imagination allows Sorger to apprehend Nature's immanence beyond what he understands of its activities through his research. In the subsequent section, a second narrator, who is a rough approximation of Sorger and Handke himself, follows the trail of painter Paul Cézanne at the Montagne Sainte-Victoire in southern France. Here, the protagonist (now in the first-person) struggles to find terms to convey his intentions: 'It was now certain that I had a communication to make about Cézanne's mountain. But what was the law of this communication, its self-evident, necessary form?' (p. 189) The nameless narrator ultimately finds what he believes to be his entry point—a gap in a ridge that he has spied in person, on a map and in

Cézanne's paintings—but his conceptual destination is more elusive. Moving beyond Sorger's aesthetic sensibility, this character seeks out a language to express it, a container or 'form,' even while he faces the paradox of being moved by something ineffable that discourse cannot encapsulate.

Both of Handke's narrator-protagonists are struggling with the gap between what they do and how they think about and articulate it, the tension between experience and explanation. In response, Handke diligently traces a middle path between narrative and essayistic writing, deliberately confusing the identities of fictional characters with elements of himself. Privileging the encounter, he eschews an overt search for what his character has acknowledged seeking ('the law of this communication') and his own text becomes a form for reflections provoked by its own journey of becoming. The ensuing text functions both as an artwork and an inscription of the process leading to its creation. *Slow Homecoming*'s style and form exemplify an element unique to artistic research that is distinct from other research-based forms of knowledge production, namely the conscious recourse to ambiguity as a tool for reflection upon its own process of discovery.

Handke's novel was an important conceptual inspiration for my film *Slow Return* (2021), for its combined meditation on landscape, experience and memory, its involvement of its own process of becoming in its final form, and its formal treatment of articulation and ambiguity. Recorded at the glacial source of the Rhône River in the Swiss Alps and its estuary in southern France, *Slow Return* begins downstream, then backtracks to the river's source, creating a counterpoint between its opposite ends. Embedded in the film's exploration of environmental change is the exploitation of human labour—in a village founded on marshland reclaimed for the cultivation of salt and the conversion of a glacier into a tourist attraction, first as a Grand Tour destination, now, in diminished form, as a roadside stop for motorists heading elsewhere. The film compresses the longue durée of the landscape's production and reproduction from *tabula rasa* to diminishing source of raw material and the derangement of Nature itself. It also interrogates the role played by visual technology in apprehending the landscape and fixing it in time, while recording technology's traces upon the landscape itself. Within this framework of beginnings and ends, an elegy to a body of

water enters into conversation with the practices and people who live alongside it, whose lived experiences are evoked within the often-speculative connections established between the two locations.

Documentary is anchored in the sonic and visual material that conveys the moment of its recording and which is synthesized through a process, which reassembles it into a tapestry composed of interwoven threads of meaning and ambiguity. The paradox of documentary film, video, and sound-making, its equal rootedness in actuality and artifice (to paraphrase an early definition), contributes to its unique concern with the 'real' as something that is singular and specific and its concurrent interrogation of reality's manifold representations. The movement between these two is one that Balsom and Peleg (2016) have named 'from document to documentary,' which, they clarify, entails taking on 'immense weight and responsibility' (p. 12). However, the approach to documentary outlined here reveals how responsibility is acquired through errancy and inclusion in the maker's own process of discovery and invention, as well as through the integration of ambiguous elements that reflect the evolving nature of comprehension.

The first day I visited the Camargue region in southern France several years ago, I was driving a car a friend had lent me in nearby Marseille. The housing projects of the city's northern edge gave way to arid hills that cradled former fishing villages next to an azure sea. I passed alongside Lake Berre with its many factories whose smoke floated above the water's impenetrable surface before driving through the port town of Fos-sur-Mer. Columns of tractor-trailers came and went through gates on my left while ahead of me I observed an increasingly different landscape from the one I had passed through: an increasingly flat marshland divided by canals and streams. Waiting to board the ferry to cross the Rhône, I suddenly felt surrounded by this new environment. Yet, when I turned my head to see the smokestacks behind me, I remembered that I hadn't come very far.

On the other side of the river, the village of Salin-de-Giraud seemed to float in a timeless atmosphere. Empty alleys were framed by plane trees and red brick houses reminiscent of factory towns further north, except that this village was surrounded by salt marshes. At its centre a single bar was open; inside I met a number of locals who told me the village's

history, the challenges its inhabitants have had to face: their isolation as well as their relationship with the land and the water surrounding them. This initial journey was soon followed by others, during which I began to shoot in the area of Salin-de-Giraud, drawn to its visual and human idiosyncrasies, which led me to initially resist an approach that would focus overt attention on the village's struggles with deindustrialization and climate change.

Video artist Ursula Biemann (2015) outlines the 'open methodology' of her process, where it 'is often more rewarding to direct only partial attention to the explicit object of analysis and to leave ample space to roam into the wider field, to encounter and examine the surprising juxtapositions and coincidences that all fieldwork generates' (p. 120). Biemann's openness to coincidence is accompanied by a 'state of divided attention, granting the freedom to relax in all directions' (ibid). Freedom, in her practice, is rigorous in its multi-directionality, but simultaneously demands the deconstruction of boundaries and preconceived notions about what constitutes a subject: 'In this mode of open research, one is disposed to not merely define the findings, but to create new and unlikely coalescences with semi-conscious affects and ideas, and with other material and immaterial surroundings, which all converge in a shared narrative matrix' (ibid). Put more simply, Biemann's deviation from the research subject is accompanied by the speculative consideration of intersections between the observed and unobserved.

Conceptual openness, like that described by Biemann, is hardly intuitive. As Hildegard Westerkamp (2007) reminds the practitioner of 'soundwalking,' listening can be, at times, a 'painful, exhausting or a rather depressing experience, as our ears are exposed often to too many, too loud or too meaningless sounds…Unless we listen with attention, there is a danger that some of the more delicate and quiet sounds may pass unnoticed by numbed ears' (p. 49). Articulation—the identification and creation of meaning—is not restricted to the process of synthesis that accompanies movement from recording to editing; indeed, it guides the concurrent stages of exploration and recording. Openness should not be equated with lack of direction, even when it resists an overt framing. Harun Farocki (2016) has described the process of documentary filmmaking as that of a dogged 'pursuit' rather than the 'anticipation' that characterizes the making of a narrative film. He notes that this process implies equal parts identification and alienation with regard to its subject—the

empathy that characterizes documentary practice for some also has an ambiguous dimension.

Three years after my first visit to the Camargue, I took another trip, to the Canton of Valais in southern Switzerland. I stayed in one of the only hotels open during late spring when ski season has ended, but the mountains are still snowbound. Most of the roads were closed and I couldn't drive to the Rhône Glacier, the purpose of my trip, so I decided to hike there on a path alongside the river instead. I walked for three hours, accompanied by the roar of snowmelt. Streams became torrents, which poured into the Rhône. Testing my determination to reach the glacier, I gave up, halted by the snow and ice in my path. Before turning back, I arrived in the hamlet of Gletsch, which sits in a valley once occupied by the glacier. Uninhabited during the off-season, Gletsch is home to a hotel, train station, and a few other scattered buildings and houses.

Returning to my hotel in the valley below that same evening, I met a number of locals. The proprietor played the accordion with his friends who accompanied him on guitar: they sang in Swiss German, their mother tongue, and French, the other official language of Valais. I was already aware that the glacier would disappear one day, but in discussion with them I learned that it would be gone by the end of this century. Before going to bed I left the hotel, walking towards the Rhône, which announced its presence through a constant noise in the middle of the valley. In the darkness, I looked downstream, thinking about the declining glacier, and how the water I could barely see would flow to the Mediterranean, creating a link between here and there. A few days later, I decided to make a film at the river's extremities: a return from the river's delta to its source as well as to the possible origins of its disappearance. I was already aware of the project's probable speculative dimension borne from the possibility that, while I felt that such a connection could and should be drawn, this might entail the construction of elements that rendered this link explicit beyond the more implicit or conceptual commonalities and connections I had observed thus far.

In film editor Dai Vaughan's (1999) discussion of 'the aesthetics of ambiguity,' he proposes an insight into the essentially reductive nature of theory and synthesis more generally. This comes within a consideration of documentary's essential paradox, that it ultimately both

reduces and widens a perspective upon reality (what Bazin [1960] has called the photographic image's 'footprint' quality, its direct invocation of the moment of its recording), functioning as 'record *and* language' (p. 55, emphasis added). Vaughan also notes, 'the ethics of filmmakers are experienced as aesthetics by the viewer' (p. 83). For Vaughan, ethics (which are not equivalent to morals but more accurately reflect the structure of the edit and the choices that inform it) are indelibly rooted in what Vaughan calls the 'pro-filmic,' the moment of recording that anticipates the film, and not only the editing stage, although it is the latter that creates the form that the viewer will ultimately accept as an approximation of reality. Each perspective, each shot, each cut, are an expression of the maker as much as they create another option for interpretation on the part of the viewer. The documentary filmmaker and editor ultimately accompany and guide their spectators all the while ceding partial control over the interpretive process. This is also dependent upon the viewer's suspension of belief, their acceptance and knowledge of the fact that they are participating in, literally, the *work* of art. According to Vaughan, the tone of this participation is partly deceptive, for 'the 'real-life' density commonly attributed by viewers to such film is our experience of active engagement in the generation of meaning' (p. 83). The spectator's participation in documentary media thus opens the sphere of practice to allow the viewer to participate in the construction of meaning themselves.

Filming a portrait of the Rhône at its beginning and end was my intention since visiting Gletsch. And yet it took several trips before I settled on an approach. From the floor of the Gletsch valley, on a particularly warm afternoon in June, I looked up at the cliff from where the glacier had previously extended. The river's current—noisier than usual—reminded me that the glacier was melting rapidly. I thought of Salin-de-Giraud and that what was happening where I was, in the middle of this austere and majestic nature, was inevitably connected to the calm platitude of the salt flats and their inhabitants. These two distant and different places were not, in the end, as different as one might have imagined, not only because the river connected them but also because, here as there, humans found themselves obliged to face Nature and their responsibility in its transformation. Even if the industrial zone opposite Salin-de-Giraud is not directly responsible for the imminent disappearance of the glacier, it is impossible to ignore the role of global warming to which the former contributes. As I began to conceptualize the form of the film which I had already

begun shooting, I reflected on the ways in which my widening perspective could be focused, and specifically started to consider how I would go about evoking these connections that I felt, but which lacked any overt evidence, for the film's viewers, without overly restricting their own conceptual formations.

A couple of days later, I met Maya, a woman originally from a neighbouring village who had spent many years outside of Switzerland working in luxury hotels, before returning to work as the manager of the Grand Hôtel Glacier du Rhône, a former Grand Tour destination in Gletsch. Maya's father, who I met at the same time, had once laboured in the construction of the ice tunnel tourist-attraction still carved annually out of the remaining sections of the glacier. That same summer, in Salin-de-Giraud, I met Nathan, a younger man who had also travelled far and wide before returning to his village where he nursed an intense relationship with his natural surroundings and a fierce criticism of ongoing pollution there. I began to film Maya, her father, and Nathan in an observational style, following their daily activities, while sharing with them the film's concept, which ultimately led to them expressing some of the connections that I had envisioned drawing between the two locations. Some of their own pronouncements centred on themes I had already considered such as industry, nature, tourism, but my collaborators developed a new common thread in their overlapping conversations about labour and human exploitation past and present.

The notion that the ambiguity embedded in documentary media can be at times deceptive is explored by the anthropologist and filmmaker Mattijs van de Port (2018), who claims to be 'infatuated with the beauty of my images' (p. 136). Anthropological resistance to the seduction of the moving image has been detailed by Castaing-Taylor (1996) among others, but van de Port is speaking of something less discipline-specific. He notes that video's aesthetic quality, its internalization of ethical content, to follow Vaughan, is opaque for him at times. Having found a language that he can 'speak' in or through, and one that certainly attracts him, he is unable to master the grammar that eludes him until he discovers the cinematic form that is best adapted to his own means. Van de Port's journey is recognizable to anyone who struggles to develop an individual style in a creative medium, and yet it is the realization that the images that he captures do not entirely *belong* to him which leads to his development of an original form, firmly situated within documentary practice.

Belonging, for Van de Port, is construed as a paradox—the rootlessness of the maker corresponds somehow to the rootedness of the material with which they work, unto itself as well as within the genre.

Dai Vaughan attests that the notion of ambiguity in documentary aesthetics is not agnostic to ethical considerations, but nor should 'ethics' be entirely restricted to political questions that permeate contemporary discourse around documentary. The figure of the editor, responsible for the synthesis and ordering of footage, is in some ways similar to that of the curator, who likewise makes use of separate 'documents' or 'works' to create an exhibition out of disparate images, texts, works. As Tarek Elhaik (2016) points out, the curator is also a figure of 'care,' who is constantly balancing their joint investment in aesthetics, ethics, and politics. In the notes to one of his exhibitions, the late curator Okwui Enwezor (2012) wrote of his aim 'to formulate a cohesive project in which contemporary realities become immanent, visible, present,' (p. 15) while simultaneously making use of his logic of assemblage to understand 'how to live with disjunction' (p. 17), a duality that reflects the documentary maker's and editor's interaction with footage's specificity and ambiguity as they assemble it for exhibition.

In the editing phase of *Slow Return*, I was accompanied by Mariangela Ciccarello, who developed the film's central thematic concerns with labour, nature and landscape, blending observational and interactive sequences. Other sections depended on the creation of elements and the addition of footage that was not actually present in the shooting locations: an animated 'piece of glacier' floating out to the Mediterranean Sea; a framed image of the Salin-de-Giraud salt flats digitally transposed to the hotel adjoining the Rhône Glacier; an inserted sequence from a James Bond film beamed into the local bar in Salin-de-Giraud suddenly transports the viewer to the Swiss Alps where it was shot. Ciccarello and I also decided to include scenes, some involving dialogue among the film's subjects, which neither connect directly to the film's larger themes nor emphasize the links between the two locations. These sections are meant to establish the flux and flow of daily life that frequently escape the focus of topical documentaries and to reflect the ambivalence with which people who have direct experience with certain phenomena might define their perspectives about them.

David Macdougall (1998) once wondered, 'If images lie, why are they so palpable of the life between us?' (p. 25). Macdougall proposes a second look 'at the spaces between the film and the subject,' which are 'charged with ambiguity,' noting that these are 'also the spaces in which consciousness is created' (ibid). Documentary's particular basis in the 'real' is analogous to the ambiguous or ambivalent forms of expression that characterize our day-to-day existence, but where is it then possible to discern the specific nature or veracity of the knowledge produced through film? It has been made clear that documentary today does not represent reality as much as it 'produces' reality, but even within this updated critical framework, the notion of ambiguity could be further foregrounded within documentary's contributions to knowledge production as an aesthetic function and as a site of productive reflection that renders it unique from other forms of film and media.

Handke's *Slow Homecoming* contains a third and final section featuring a narrator-protagonist who is the most explicitly autobiographical of the three: a man living in Austria with a young child. The disarticulation of the first two sections of the novella thus converges upon a depiction that is biographically closer to the actual author of the prose without any corresponding stylistic change. I intended to execute a similar move at the end of *Slow Return*, which would articulate my own intentions while eschewing the catharsis of a conclusion. Such an ending was facilitated by Maya, the former hotel manager, who had asked me to help her construct a platform bed just outside her father's summer cabin on one of the slopes below Gletsch. In the film's final sequence, Maya directs me as we make the bed and discuss her plans to turn it into a holiday rental. While she no longer works at the Grand Hôtel, her passion for hospitality persists, and she hopes to monetize the property's proximity to Nature. The co-existence of an ecological consciousness with commercial intent is expressed without judgment, emphasizing the co-dependent nature of phenomena and processes that simultaneously construct and undermine, clarify and dissolve, articulate and obscure.

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