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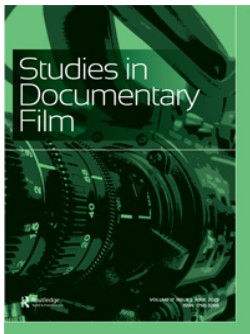
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On the particularities of experience and spectatorship in Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's *Commensal* as experience and *Caniba* as story

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the potential of the art-installation as a space for experiential and sensory mediation of non-fiction film. Using the installation *Commensal* (2017) by Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor as a case study, I discuss the contribution of contemporary art to discourses on spectatorship and audience experience in non-fiction film. Taking *Commensal* as a starting point, I will examine how the experience of the visitor to the art installation might differ from that of the audience member at a cinema. How does the space, institutional context and institutional mediation of a non-fiction film installation contribute to the contamination of boundaries between fictional storytelling and objective truth? By comparing *Commensal* and *Caniba* (2017), the feature-length theatrical version of the same subject by the same filmmakers, I will propose that presentation and screening in the context of the installation space offers new forms of mediation for some non-fiction film works that are experiential as opposed to spectatorial.

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Introduction

documenta 11, the major contemporary art exhibition that took place in Kassel, Germany in 2002, is often characterised as the moment when contemporary art took a distinctive 'documentary turn' (Balsom 2012, 162). The curator of that exhibition, Okwui Enwezor, was advocating for the use of documentary and archival material within contemporary art practices not simply as objects of evidence, but as elements of interchanges between indexical forces, institutions and audiences, while also deliberately troubling definitions of documentary and the place that it held in the hierarchy of artistic forms (Enwezor 2014, 37). Since documenta 11, what is sometimes still known as 'documentary' is a common element in works of contemporary art, often in the form of moving-image video and film installations, which have become a common feature of exhibitions in contemporary art galleries, museums and art spaces since the 1990s (Barclay and Munt 2019, 364). These new contexts of

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presentation and exhibition continue to contribute to conversations around the expansion of the epistemological function of the documentary form. Elizabeth Cowe for instance, suggested that the gallery space created a new way to see documentary as something that is self-referentially critical: 'For it is in its facility or factness that documentary is an art object, and thereby engages us to reflect on the possibilities and impossibilities of knowing reality really, and on the construction of our audiovisual discourses of knowledge' (Cowie 2009, 126).

In this article, I explore how the context of the contemporary art exhibition space can create different sets of meanings for works of documentary film or video which are potentially at odds with meanings created by the same works as experienced in a cinema auditorium or on a domestic screen. In this exploration, I employ a comparison between the video and film installation *Commensal* by Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor at the documenta 14 exhibition in 2017 and its feature-length documentary counterpart *Caniba* by the same artists, which was screened at film festivals and theatres throughout 2018 and 2019 and was subsequently released on DVD and on a subscription streaming service. This comparison partially relies on an analysis of the experience of certain particulars present at the installation space for *Commensal* at documenta 14 in 2017, including the re-purposed factory in which it was screened, the separation of film and video elements and the context of a major international contemporary art exhibition. I will use the concept of the *dispositif* as mobilised by Ella Barclay and Alex Munt in their examination of artist's moving image work in the gallery to identify how a physical, sensory and socio-political experience can define an audience's mediation of documentary moving-image work as presented the art-exhibition space (Barclay and Munt 2019, 364)

The artist/ filmmakers behind *Commensal* and *Caniba*, Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor and are perhaps best known for their 2012 experimental documentary *Leviathan*, which was a feature-length ethnographic-style, immersive audio and visual account of life (and death) aboard a commercial fishing trawler. As core members of the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard University, the pair engage in experimental forms of ethnographic research, situating their work in the area where visual anthropology, documentary film and contemporary art practices overlap ([Sensory Ethnography Lab](#)). The SEL experiments with new forms of ethnographic representation that deprioritise text and language in favour of a 'phenomenology of aesthetic experience', as described by John Dewey in his 1934 book, *Art as Experience* (MacDonald 2015, 402). By using a comparison of their work for documenta 14: *Commensal* and their feature-length documentary *Caniba*, this article asks if these phenomenological objectives of the SEL are better achieved by the presentation of their experimental documentary work as gallery installations. To examine how *Commensal* as a contemporary art installation may ultimately (and possibly inadvertently) deliver a contradictory message to *Caniba* as a feature-length documentary film, I will unwrap the audience experiences of each under three main thematic headings. The first is an analysis of *Commensal* as an embodied experience, taking into consideration the meanings produced by its position as a site-specific installation at a major international art exhibition, as well as those produced by the site itself. Using a review of scholarship on audience passivity and/or activity in both the cinema and the art exhibition contexts, I will consider the agency of interaction of the visitor to a site-specific art installation as a determining factor in the mediation of a work of non-fiction film or video. Following that, an analysis

of the narrative structure of *Caniba* and the apparent absence of narrative in *Commensal* will reveal how the different contexts for presentation may predetermine the function of narrative in non-fiction film and video. Using the writings of Laura Mulvey on narrative in conventional cinema, the ‘Beyond Story’ manifesto of Alisa Lebow and Alexandra Juhasz and the work of Erika Balsom on the potential of new narrative forms in the art-space, I will discuss how narrative storytelling in documentary film may affect the agency of judgement and mediation of the audience (Juhasz and Lebow 2018, 1).

The ambiguity that exists between truth-telling and fictional storytelling in non-fiction film was cleverly and simply articulated by Christian Metz (1982), who wrote that ‘every film is a fiction film’ (44). Objectivity as a goal of documentary film, or ‘knowing reality really’ as phrased by Elizabeth Cowe, has been much debated, and the recent proliferation of documentary material as elements of contemporary artworks has contributed new elements to this debate (Cowie 2009, 126). A comparison between *Caniba* and *Commensal* provides a useful way of looking at how documentary material is used, understood and engaged with in the contemporary art-space as opposed to the cinema-space. This third section of my article articulates the position of documentary materials within a contemporary art context as functional and aesthetic rather than definitive and argues that the boundary between fiction and fact blurs over a contaminated marginal zone more readily than is often obvious in the cinema or domestic screen contexts.

Commensal as experience

The film and video installation *Commensal* was first presented at documenta 14 in Kassel, Germany in 2017. The installation explored the ‘complicated’ story of Issei Sagawa, who gained notoriety in 1981 when as a student in Paris, he murdered and partially cannibalised Renéé Hartevelt, a fellow student (Peleg). In September 2017 Paravel and Taylor also theatrically released a feature-length documentary, *Caniba*, on the same subject and made from the same source material.

Both *Commensal* and *Caniba* are made in the style of and by the loose rules of ‘sensory ethnography’, which Paravel and Taylor have become known for since the production of their film *Leviathan* in 2012. Their work was described by Hila Peleg in the documenta 14 Daybook as ‘non-narrative epics [which] are meditative and trance-like journeys into unseen and alien aspects of our environments; they unearth a different order for the principles of knowledge and cinematographic language, one that is non-signifying and non-hierarchical’ (Peleg). Using the ethnographic principle of long-engagement with participants as a starting point, one innovation of the Sensory Ethnography Lab is that it privileges sensory and ‘somatic’ experience and knowledge over textual or discursive: ‘We are somatic creatures before we are linguifying ones. Independently – we didn’t know each other then – we both felt a desire to retreat from language, and limit ourselves to images and sounds’ (Documenta 14). *Commensal*, as an experience, could be read as exemplary of this approach, especially when taking in to account the situation, site and location of its installation. It is one example of an artwork where the core principle of sensory ethnography to provide sensory experiences through cultural practices has been brought into the site-specific

contemporary art context.¹



(Rühling 2017)

Site-specificity in contemporary art has its roots in a crossover between sculptural practices and conceptual art, and can take various forms, from work that is designed for certain specific architectural spaces and features, to artwork that addresses the socio-economic or political aspects of a specific place.² While the story of Issei and Jun Sagawa as mediated by the work by Paravel and Taylor was not necessarily conceived solely for installation in Kassel, *Commensal* as an installation was designed as a one-off installation for documenta 14, presumably as a result of an extended conversation between the artists and the artistic director Adam Szymczk. As I will explain, site-specificity in the case of *Commensal* links the artwork directly to the city, the exhibition and the building in which it was installed in terms of experience.

Tofufabrik, the site of the installation, is situated on the margins of Kassel's city centre, where the large-scale international, non-commercial, curated exhibition of contemporary art takes place every five years.³ Now an artist-run space for music and exhibitions, the building was originally used to process bean-curd into tofu, and the interior of the building still demonstrates some of the fittings and paraphernalia associated with industrial food production such as white tiled walls and heavy plastic strip curtains. Walter Benjamin wrote that architecture was perhaps the first form of art that was widely, publicly consumed, and therefore its effect as a cultural experience is passive, and often collective: 'Its history is longer than that of any other art, and imaginatively recalling its effects is important as regards any attempt to form a conclusion about how the masses relate to art' (Benjamin 1968, 34). The nuances of architecture as work of art are received in a state of distraction: 'Architecture has always provided the prototype of a work of art that is received in a state of distraction and by the collective' (Benjamin 1968, 34). In curating a work of art within a specific building it should be assumed that the building itself will provide a certain context, as opposed to the 'white cube' of a gallery or art-museum, which may sometimes be an attempt at a generic receptacle to remove context from the work of art. The darkened box of the cinema space carries its own set of connotations as traditionally a place of mainstream bourgeois cultural entertainment, as does the building that hosts the theatre, the street, the city, and all of these physical contexts come with a set of expectations for how one is to behave within. The installation space for *Commensal* at

a former food-processing plant was a deliberate curatorial framing of an artwork within a certain space. It lends a layer of connotation to the work that further alters the experience: the interior of the tofu factory might as well have been an abattoir, where we as audience were invited to participate in the recalling of heinous crimes and the collective judgement of the criminal.

Though part of a prestigious international exhibition, the site for this installation on the margins Kassel removed it from the context of the art museum. The repurposed site or site-specific installation differs from the art museum in the way it contextualises the artwork, and in this case in the way that it has isolated the artwork from the rest of the festival. Anna Raczynski has explained that, when aspects of sculptural practice were adopted in the presentation of video artworks, 'the context and the content became interchangeable' (Raczyński 2013, 129). The spaces around and outside the projection(s) or screens are recognised as important elements of what is effectively now a sculptural space, which the interaction and movement of the spectator activates to become a space of participation and performance. While acknowledging that the documenta exhibition is itself a privileged cultural space on a global scale, it must be remembered that it is also primarily a space for artistic experimentation, and the works that are installed in various re-purposed spaces (as well as in conventional museum spaces) in the city of Kassel every five years may set precedents for future artistic works. In the case of *Commensal*, the specific site chosen, as well as being a former industrial facility, is now in the hands of a group of artists who have in effect taken control of the means of artistic production for themselves. The self-described 'experimental' objectives of the SEL sit well within the context of this artist-run gallery, which is traditionally a space for experimentation outside of the artistic establishment. All these layers of context cannot be overlooked when experiencing a work of art that outwardly claims to privilege an experience based on the sensorial and experiential over the intellectual and discursive.

The installation itself consisted of two moving-image elements, a 16mm archival film projection and a digital video projection in an adjoining room. Entering the installation space through these plastic curtains, the audience was met with the silent 16mm film projection showing archival home footage of Issei Sagawa and his brother Jun as children in Kobe, Japan. This footage, which was 42-minutes long and looping, portrayed what seemed to be a happy and rather privileged family, with the two brothers play-fighting and dressing in costumes. The only sound affecting this film installation was the whirring of the film projector and the sound spilling from the video installation in the adjoining room.

Further into the installation, the main element was a looping, 27-minute video with sound projected in a large tile-lined room, which was fitted with two short rows of cinema seats. In it, the faces of Issei Sagawa and his brother are portrayed in extreme close-up, the image drifting in and out of focus, as they talk to each other and out into the room regarding pain, sexual and physical desire, guilt and the crime of 1981. At Tofufabrik, the sound of the voices of the two men from the video reverberated against the walls of the room, where certain lights had been left on, presumably so that the audience might absorb a sense of the space along with the subject of the installation.

The site-specific moving-image installation differs from theatrical film presentation in a number of fundamental ways. As both in a sense sculpture and film, it is a hybridised

exhibition-form, but one that can produce very different effects to the experience of watching a film in the cinema. The visitor to the video installation has a different special awareness to the spectator at the cinema, as Catherine Elwes puts it, ‘a phenomenological sensitivity to all that is actual and present within a bounded space’ (Elwes 2015, 1). On entering *Commensal* in August 2017, my first instinct was to interact with the whirring film projection in a darkened space, while I used my other senses to augment my vision as I searched around me to take hold of my bearings. The unspoken social contract of the contemporary art installation is that I enter silently, and move about while regarding each piece of art without deliberately affecting the experience of others who I might be sharing the space with. Stepping into the second part of the installation, the choice was to remain standing, to move slowly around the room, or to decide to sit and fully engage with the video, not knowing at what stage of the looping video I entered, or if it mattered. Though the image of the projection and the sounds coming from the speakers contained the substance of the installation, the uncanny presence of the building around inevitably became an element. Unlike cinema screenings and some video installations whose aim is to create a darkened, generic space for projection, at Tofufabrik the interior of the former food-processing plant became an active contextual element of the installation. On that occasion, I chose to sit and absorb the video and sound.

The video element of *Commensal* consisted of a two-part interaction between Issei Sagawa and his brother Jun. The two-metre tall projection showed the face of an ailing Issei Sagawa in extreme close-up, close enough to see remnants of food on his face, and when the focus shifted, to see the eyes of his brother. Sagawa-san blankly stares into the lens and out into the installation space, often hesitating for minutes before making sometimes frightening statements:

It’s because I ate Renée ... I know I’m crazy. I think mad. Really. Because ... A calm mind, and sexual ... desires. I couldn’t contain myself... within ... that peace. I tried to make myself believe ... it was her body. In vain.

In the footage, Jun attends to an apparently incapacitated Issei, feeding him chocolate. In moments of conversation, Issei describes his crime, his desire to be eaten by the woman he murdered, asking his brother to cause him pain, switching between speaking Japanese, English and French, an indication of his awareness of the presence of the filmmakers (Paravel is French and Castaing-Taylor is English). The next scene shows close-up images of a manga comic that Issei Sagawa made about his crime. His brother turns the pages and expresses his horror, surprise and disgust as he does so: ‘this is a piece of shit’. Through this scene, the visitors to *Commensal* were given for the first time visceral and visual context for the subject of the installation: the crime of Issei Sagawa, his unrepentant obsession with his victim, his profiteering from it all. These context-creating scenes are punctuated by long, uncomfortable, blurry considerations of Issei’s face, the accompanying sounds of his mouth chewing, the buzzing of an appliance in the room, faint sounds from the street outside. The visitor to *Commensal* who chose (as I did) to remain and experience the installation, became physically absorbed into the engrossing presence of Issei Sagawa as mediated by the

context of Tofufabrik.



(Paravel and Castaing-Taylor 2017)

This is an example of an expanded documentary practice that blends the aesthetic and socio-historic properties of the city, exhibition and space with ‘aspects of the real’ (Frankham 2022, 1). Bettina Frankham gave the type of work where documentary and video-art practices overlap the term ‘Critical Aesthetic Practice’, where the aesthetic and sensory experience of the ‘documentary-like work’ is an integrated part of the communication strategy (Frankham 2022, 4). This practice not only enhances the sensory experience and adds additional meaning to the artwork, but as I will discuss later in the article, it also creates a space where documentary can be inevitably read as subjective and aesthetic artworks, dispelling an expectation in engagement in the fantasy of ‘knowing reality really’ (Cowie 2009, 128).

Multi-screen, site-specific installations such as *Commensal* are best described as an individual experience rather than a spectacle that can be experienced as a part of a group. The combination of elements that comprises it or as termed by Ella Barclay and Alex Munt in their adaption of the Bellourian concept, the *dispositif* of the installation determines the specific subjective experience of the visitor (Barclay and Munt 2019, 363). The elements of this *dispositif*, including the socio-historical conditions of the site, the aesthetic properties of the space and the contents of the artwork, amount to a sensory experience, while the multiple screens in this film and video installation also make it a navigable experience: the visitor is mobile, interacting with the work according to their own will (Barclay and Munt 2019, 363). Writing about the forty-channel video installation *Kuba* (2005) by Kutlag Ataman, Elizabeth Cowie described it as a documentary fragmented into its constituent parts that can never be experienced in the same way by the same visitor or by other visitors twice:

the visitor moves between the forty arrayed screens to a particular television, and specific story: each time the same kind of encounter, but each time a different telling of a different story. Seeing the same difference an new difference each time, she creates her own edited version of these stories as she moves from chair to chair ... (Cowie 2009, 126)

The experience is personal and interactive; possible readings of the message of the installation are myriad, dependent on the physical movements and choices of the visitor. Catherine Elwes goes further to argue that this interactive relationship that the visitor has with a moving-image installation creates a new way to relate to an artwork:

... installation and the moving image dramatizes and focuses our relationship to cultural by creating a separate space of interaction, and ante-room to reality, a play room in which visitors can explore and seek new ways of participating in our increasingly fragmented, polyphonic and mediated environment. (Elwes 2015, 151)

This 'newly emancipated spectator' is free to come and go, to navigate the work rather than sit and consume it, or instead, as a visitor to an exhibition like documenta, which takes place throughout an entire city over a period of months, they may choose to return for a second or third interaction (Elwes 2015, 156).

But this ease of movement and endless agency of choice cannot always be assumed to be an idealistic, emancipated means of interaction with moving-image artworks. It has been noted that the freedom of movement of the spectator may even become a negative factor in an overall experience of an artwork. Erika Balsom has observed that the perpetual movement of the spectator at a large-scale exhibition (such as documenta or large-scale biennales), where the next enticing artwork is always around the corner, mimics the movements of the consumer in the shopping centre, and so is complying to the systems of power which contemporary art often aspires to critique:

... in recent decades the institution has become increasingly permeable and malleable in an effort to maintain relevance. It has begun to value flexibility and mobility rather than permanence and stasis. In this paradigm, to circulate and participate are by no means activities of resistance, but in fact precisely what is demanded of us in the experience economy. (Balsom 2012, 51)

The spectator becomes a passive consumer of art in this scenario, drifting through spaces and galleries and moving on to the next artwork if their interest is not sufficiently grabbed. The seeming agency that the audience is given is overshadowed by a kind of choice paralysis, or what Elwes calls 'spectatorial attention deficit' (Elwes 2015, 156). By contrast, the traditional spectator of film sits silently in their seat in the darkened cinema, and they have almost no choice once seated but to engage with the sound and images that are put in front of them, at least on some level. However, the idea that the role of the traditional spectator of film is simply that of a passive agent has been a persistent trope in film theory since at least the writings on the apparatus and on cinema and psychoanalysis of the 1970s. Roland Barthes for example suggests that the entire experience of cinema-going is hypnotic, even before the cinema-goer enters the building, that what he calls the 'cinema situation' is a 'lure', a cocoon of signifiers and signified (Barthes 1975, 104). For Barthes, the cinema experience is like a dream or a hypnotic state which is not just associated with the film but with the entire apparatus surrounding it, and only begins to wear off long into its aftermath. Jean-Louis Baudry goes slightly further to suggest that the cinema experience can be compared to a pre-fabricated out-of-body experience. This is made apparent when the technical apparatus (the film projector) breaks down. He notes: 'the disturbing effects which result during a projection from breakdowns in the recreation of movement, when the spectator is brought abruptly back to discontinuity – that is, to the body, to the technical apparatus which he had *forgotten*' (Baudry 1976, 105). On the other side of a dichotomy is the active spectator who, according to Richard Rushton are considered to be the 'hoped-for products of an avant-garde cinema' (Rushton 2009, 47). In response to 1970s' film theory's focus on the passive spectator, writers such as David Bordwell (1985, 29) and Teresa de Lauretis (1984, 56)

point out that in various actions of decoding and perceiving information coming from the screen the spectator is critically in control of the production of meaning. Jacques Rancière's proposal for an 'emancipated spectator' is not concerned with innovations in how the theatrical space is used, or with how much physical agency the spectator has; rather the spectator has their own power over the presentation in that they may choose to interpret it in their own way – the spectatorial agency is realised as intellectual and interior rather than something sensory or exterior. He writes here in relation to the spectator of live theatre, but the principle can also be applied to the cinema-goer:

She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way – by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which she has heard or dreamt, experienced or invented. They are both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them. (Rancière 2008, 13)

This may be the case for works of art and film that are intellectual and discursive at their base, where the distance between viewer and screen may be travelled in an act of intellectual autonomy; but, in a work of sensory ethnographic video art such as *Commensal* that is first and foremost intended *as experience*, then perhaps this level of emancipation is not enough. I argue that the experience of a work of site-specific, moving-image installation is something aside from both the paralysed browser at the art fair or art museum, and the passive spectator/audience member at the cinema. Each of these has the potential for spectatorial emancipation in their own rights, but within the moving-image installation space we have the crucial elements of what Guy Debord would have called a 'Situation' as opposed to a spectacle, where, as I have described earlier, the audience intervenes or participates to some extent in the work by their agency of physical presence and engagement (Debord 1957, 106). Debord links the experience of the spectacle directly to passive consumption, suggesting that it does not itself deliver anything, but is a depiction of what society could deliver, separating 'what is possible from what is permitted' (Debord 1957, 15). The participant in the Situation, on the other hand is truly emancipated. In the video installation, they participate in the experience by their presence, movement, their navigation between and interaction with each of the screens, and perhaps by their reconfirmed presence, emphasised by their ability and choice to leave, then return again and again if they wish.

Contaminations of boundaries

Since the 'documentary turn' in contemporary art after documenta 11 in 2002 there has been a proliferation of artists using moving image material and other 'documents', but often with a different imperative to that of the conventional filmmaker. The artist, working in a field that often prioritises experimentation above all else, can move back and forth between fictional storytelling and documentary truth. The documentary within contemporary art is simply a mode by which artists manage their message; non-fiction-based contemporary art is just that – it will never be just 'documentary', instead it carries elements of documentary and elements of aesthetics experience to instead become what Bettina Frankham calls 'documentary-like' (Frankham 2022, 2). The positioning of documentary work within the art context moves it to the intersection between the two disciplines that expands on the meanings created by nonfiction material

to include the aesthetic conditions for its presentation as well as the content. The function of documentary within contemporary art was articulated by Okwui Enwezor when writing about documenta 11, where he positions documentary not a means to itself, but just as a tool within a larger artistic discourse:

Each of these artists in documenta 11 employ the tools of the documentary and the function of the archive as procedures for inducting new flows and transactions between images, texts, narratives, documents, statements, events, communities, institutions, audiences. And each confounds the role of the documentary in establishing a hierarchy between images and artistic forms, between ethics and aesthetics, politics and poetics, truth and fiction. (Enwezor 2004, 37)

Through their work, contemporary artists and experimental filmmakers have actively found ways to directly reassess the function of documentary, articulating that documentary can have a function outside of perceived objective truth-telling. The ‘documentary-like’ work of contemporary art can seek for new ways to articulate new forms of aesthetic and epistemological truths, some which may be sensory, anecdotal or attitudinal. Examples include the Lebanese artist Walid Raad, who created an extensive fictional archive of photography, film, writings and objects named *The Atlas Group* (1989–2004), whose aim was to ‘research, document, study and produce audio, visual and literary artefacts that shed light on the contemporary history of Lebanon’, in so doing raising questions about how documents are used to produce specific historical narrative (Raad). *The Casting* by Omar Fast (2007) is described by Erika Balsom as displaying a ‘contamination of media’ (Balsom 2012, 170). This two-channel video installation simultaneously shows interviews with actors in casting sessions, and fictional re-enactments of stories described by the actors in what becomes a reflexive feedback loop, contaminating the boundaries between fictional storytelling and documentary testimony. The context of contemporary art, thus, becomes a space for mediating documentary material as a fluid, constituent element of a message, rather than simply as a source of verified information. In the examples mentioned above documentary material is used either to highlight its subjective nature, or in the presumption that the audience will read it as subjective. In the realm of traditional nonfiction film genre, historical attempts which have been made at conceiving of techniques in documentary filmmaking that aspire to objective readings have exposed that the intentionality of authorship often becomes a defining factor. Erika Balsom, commenting on Christian Metz’s assertion that every film is a fiction film, notes that every type of film ‘unrealises’ what it tries to represent, potentially turning it into spectacle, and that certain types of film, such as *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema, have:

attempted to combat this necessary unrealisation by cultivating formal techniques that would aim to collapse image and referent in the production of objective truth. This denial of mediation is however eminently ideological, as it aims to dissimulate the processes of unrealisation that are always at work. (Balsom 2012, 170)

Here we can stretch Balsom’s ‘certain types’ of film to include ethnographic filmmaking, which through intentions of anthropological rigour has cultivated formal techniques such as long-term, non-interventionist observation and long takes. The formal aims of ethnographic film, then, in its original capacity as secondary scientific source material, could also be seen as ideological. It is this problematising of conventional ethnographic

filmmaking that the Sensory Ethnography Lab have embraced through experimentation with formal techniques and presentation of work within the contemporary art context. Their use of principles of ethnographic research as a conceptual starting point within the context of a contemporary art exhibition might be seen as a challenge to both the institution of the museum and to the practice of ethnography. In writing about the contamination of boundaries between ethnographic filmmaking and surrealism in Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes (Land Without Bread, 1933)*, Laura Rascaroli points out that the film 'self-consciously locates itself in a generic in-betweenness to carry out a subversive critique of Western discourses of authenticity, science, technology exoticism, imperialism, and race' (Rascaroli 2017, 76). This tactic of positioning *Commensal* as a non-fiction film/video installation *in-between* ethnography, seen as empirical record, and contemporary art installation, seen as subjective experience, may then be read as a critique of both institutions, and a useful strategy to create a set of ambiguous expectations in the audience. Speaking about the work of the Sensory Ethnography Lab, Lucien Castaing-Taylor points out that the objective of their work is to simply produce experience: 'The SEL is concerned not with analysing, but with actively producing aesthetic experience, and of kinds that reflect and draw on but do not necessarily clarify, or leave one with the illusion of "understanding" everyday experience' (MacDonald 2015, 402). Their work could be labelled as 'documentary' because of its roots in observational ethnographic filmmaking. As theatrical, feature-length films with beginning and end credits, both *Caniba* and *Leviathan* have often been described as documentaries, or 'experimental documentaries' (Russell 2015, 27). The video and film installation *Commensal* was made from the same original and archived material as *Caniba*, but there is no reference to it as 'documentary' in the promotional and critical materials from documenta 14. Rather, within the contaminated boundaries of the contemporary art space, it is both an aesthetic, sensory experience and documentary-like testimony.

Caniba as narrative

Issei Sagawa was never found guilty for the crimes he committed in France, instead he was deemed innocent by reason of insanity, and only served a short period in a French institution. Significantly, this context was not immediately given to the visitor to *Commensal* at documenta 14, and was only available to discovery when searched for in the bulky (and difficult to navigate) exhibition catalogue. The 'theatrical', feature-length version of *Commensal* was first shown at the Venice Biennale cinema programme in September 2017, then released generally on the 19th of October 2018. In 2020 the film was released on DVD, BLU-RAY and on the Apple TV streaming service. This version of the work adds layers to the story that were not present at the installation. A paragraph before the opening title explains the background to the crimes of Issei Sagawa, with the added disclaimer that 'this film does not seek to justify or legitimize that crime'. At the end of the opening credits of *Caniba*, the audience is presented with a quote from the Gospel According to John, in what might be seen as an attempt at establishing an ambiguous moral standpoint for the filmmakers:

Verily, verily I say unto you,
 Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man,
 And drink his blood,

Ye have no life in you.

He that eateth my flesh,
And drinketh my blood,
Dwelleth in me, and I in him.

After this paragraph, the viewer is introduced to the Sagawa brothers through close-up shots of their juxtaposed faces. The voice of Jun Sagawa drifts in and out as he helps his brother to eat; the sound of the fridge in the room and the traffic outside tell us that they are in an urban apartment setting – all this introducing the audience to the scene and the players. After eleven long minutes of close-up in-and-out of focus shots, uncomfortable closeness and relative linguistic silence, Issei begins to talk about his crime and his fetishistic desires, as the camera searches for a reaction in the eyes of his brother. This introduction to the story and the characters continues as they talk about their family and childhoods, desire and disappointment. The middle section of the film brings the audience on a journey through the psyches of both the Sagawa brothers. Here, in a break from the close-up footage of limbs and faces, the audience watches a selection of close-up screen-recordings of scenes from the pornographic film in which Issei acted, then a flick through a disturbing manga comic book that Issei made about his crime, Jun Sagawa demonstrating his own masochistic sexual fetish by tying his arm up with barbed wire for the cameras of Paravel and Castaing-Taylor, as he talk about this activity openly and frankly, followed by some home footage of the brothers as children as seen in the *Commensal* 16 mm film installation, but this time the accompanying sound is the ambient noise of the brothers in their room as if they too were watching the footage. The beginning is textual, informative and context-creating; the middle section is at times grotesque, horrifying and transgressive in its display of desire, pain, memory and loss of innocence, the end section brings us back to a sense of stability, with scenes of an almost pleasant nature where Issei's female carer makes him smile with a story about how she dressed up as a zombie, and finally leaves the stuffy, enclosed space of the (unseen) apartment to take him for a walk in the park. The final scene, then, shows Issei staring lovingly up from his wheelchair at his female companion, as he utters the words, 'This is a miracle.' Here, the image fades to black, the sounds of the park fade away, and the music of 'La Folie', a song by British post-punk band The Stranglers inspired by Issei Sagawa, begins to play, with karaoke graphics appearing against the black screen in pink and yellow text.

An obvious conclusion from a comparison of the two versions is that the filmmakers / artists of *Commensal* and *Caniba* have crafted two pieces of very different work which ultimately oppose each other's philosophical objectives: *Commensal* as a work that is to be absorbed by the senses, and *Caniba* as a story to be followed. An initial clue to the intentions of the filmmakers can be found in the definitions of the titles of the two works. *Commensal*, when used as a noun, can mean simply a companion at a table. When used as an adjective, it can describe a reciprocal arrangement between two biological organisms, each effectively living off one another, but without harming the other. This title, then, is suggestive of a relationship, we assume that between Issei Sagawa and his brother, though the relationship between Issei and his victim must also be considered. But perhaps the relationship between Issei Sagawa and the audience is also being alluded to here. The title *Caniba*, on the other hand, is more leading and less suggestive.

It is a direct reference to the act of eating the flesh of another human. This use of words cannot be seen as accidental. In a transcription of a public conversation with Hila Peleg posted on the documenta 14 website, Paravel and Castaing-Taylor acknowledge that, although their objective as collaborative filmmakers is to ‘retreat from language’, *Commensal* and *Caniba* are both in effect a portrait of a person that is mediated through language as well as gesture:

In *Commensal* (2019), our piece with Sagawa-san, we attend as much to what he seems unable to say as to what he does; it is very much at the outer limits of language. But the interplay between articulable and nonarticulable, both linguistically and ethically, remains at its core. (Peleg, 2017)

Language, therefore, is treated here not just as a medium to deliver a message, but also as a channel of meta-intellectual sensory information. This certainly seems to be the case in the installation, where the words spoken by Issei Sagawa and his brother Jun blended, together with the sounds of eating and the ambient sounds from the street outside, into a set of mumblings that were just coherent enough to allow the viewer access to a basic kind of narrative, one that contains just enough information as to provide context to the images, all of this reverberating violently against the shiny walls of the former tofu factory. The looping of the video and film aspects of the installation, then, which deprives the visitor of an obvious beginning or end, further compounds the impossibility of a more complex narrative. As I have already established, *Commensal* was intended as a sensory experience and the conditions for its presentation contribute to this reading of the artwork.

Caniba, on the other hand, as it would appear in a cinema auditorium or on a domestic screen, classifies itself as a film with a story, a ‘documentary’, using introductory contextual information, a biblical quote and end credits, but most of all using what amounts to a narrative structure. Narrative in film does not always necessarily follow a predetermined trajectory, but can conceal itself within certain innovations. *Caniba*, as a feature-length film, aims to be formally experimental and unconventional and in many ways it is; however, I would argue that a kind of conventional narrative can be found lurking inside it. Writing about the structure of typical feature-length films, Laura Mulvey described it as a threefold narrative that is fluid within, but that is ultimately conservative, where the first and third components are static and not subject to change, while the middle section can be as unconventional as it desires to be:

In the middle section, the drama and pleasure consist in the eruption of events that disorders the laws of everyday normality ... this phase celebrates transgressive desire and organises it into a stylised cultural form: narrative. Just as the middle section erupts into action with disorder, so the end must integrate disorder back into stability. The rule of law closes in the space for transgression and disruption. (Mulvey 1987, 13)

She proposed that avant-garde cinema should aim to conceive of a way to end a film *without closure*, thereby allowing the transgression of the middle section to flourish into an examination of the mythology and symbology of a story. The narrative structure of *Caniba* appears to follow this threefold form. By contrast, *Commensal*, did not include any end scenes, or pursue any sense of narrative resolution due to the constantly looping film and video. Instead it used the experimental potential and flexibility of the installation

space to simply hover endlessly over the interactions of Issei Sagawa with his brother, avoiding even a hint of a linear, dramaturgical reading.

My first watching experience of *Caniba* was at my home on a television screen on the Apple TV streaming service. In contrast to my experience of *Commensal* over two years earlier, *Caniba* was watched on the same screen and in the same room where I had watched various other docuseries' and documentaries. This experience was very much in line with the structure that Laura Mulvey described, with the internal, difficult, experimental and ultimately transgressive middle section of the film (essentially a compilation of the contents of the *Commensal* installation at documenta 14) packaged into ninety minutes and bookended on either side by the opening and closing sequences which carry all the trappings of what is considered normal for a feature-length documentary film. As viewed on a domestic television, *Caniba* is essentially a 'casual' and isolating experience. (Ellis 2001, 165). Watching abnormal and transgressive behaviour on a domestic television is nothing unusual. John Ellis suggests that the very function of television is to confirm the normalcy and stability of the domestic space by creating a perceived division between that safety and the unpredictability and uncertainty of the 'outside' world as depicted on the screen:

This accords with the basic ideological division of life in our society, to which other distinctions can the accrue. The "inside" becomes the area of safety, of confirmation of identity, of power, the "outside" that of risk, of challenge to identity, of helplessness. (Ellis 2001, 165)

Ellis suggests that the cinema space differs in that it is primarily a space for entertainment, but it is also a space where transgression and uncertainty is allowed to affect the audience, for at least a certain amount of time, creating an anxiety that is a fundamental element of the cinema experience (Ellis 2002, 85). To complete the experience, this spectatorial anxiety must be controlled and resolved before the cinema doors open:

the spectator's anxiety is an anxiety that is provoked in safety, because its resolution is guaranteed by the institution of cinema itself, which is not in the habit of presenting incomplete films. The spectator's anxiety is thus the result of contradictory desires: the desire that the film should continue, and the desire that the film should end. (Ellis 2001, 85)

In *Caniba*, the resolution at the end of the film comes when Issei Sagawa leaves his apartment with his female carer, and when the ironic music of the Stranglers introduces the end of the film.

In their 'Beyond Story' manifesto, Alisa Lebow and Alexandra Juhasz discuss the recent rise in public consumption of documentary films, especially in the context of the consumer-based funding structures and marketing of documentary productions (Juhasz and Lebow 2018, 1). In this manifesto and in a subsequent article written in *World Records Journal*, they explain how in order to meet an increasing dependence on 'rubrics, numbers and profits' the documentary industry has developed an over-reliance on the identification of characters and storylines, so much that, 'storytelling has become for today the unquestioned modality for documentary' (Juhasz and Lebow 2018, 12). Of course this is not to make the claim that documentaries with character-driven narratives are all commodified and lack political, aesthetic or critical faculties, but that more experimental and innovative forms of documentary are suffering from a lack of financial support and exposure due to this trend. What a *Time Magazine*

article termed ‘Docu-Mania’ in 2021 has risen partly as a result of the success of stand-alone and series documentaries on streaming services such as Netflix, Apple TV, and Amazon Prime TV (Berman 2021).

Lebow and Juhasz argue that this model’s over-reliance on character-driven storylines has resulted in a formulaic, narrow conception of what documentary is and can do: ‘... said characters’ actions being arranged through a set recognizable spatial/temporal templates that cohere only nominally to lived reality given that they are arranged through a cause effect logic that does not remotely resemble reality as it is experienced’ (Juhasz and Lebow 2018, 2). The transgressive and possibilities for artistic mediation of realities are being squandered in this market-driven climate of documentary consumption, and at the front of this erasure of possibility is an insistence on character-driven story and narrative. In short, documentary film, as it is currently experienced on television screens and in cinema auditoriums, is being forced into a position where narrative and character-driven story dominate. But perhaps this is not necessary. In their manifesto, Lebow and Juhasz seem to be suggesting that a new, experimental reality is possible for documentary film. But in the meantime, the realities of the marketplace as determined by the desires of audiences is determining the structural forms that even ‘arthouse’ and experimental documentaries are being forced into taking.

Erika Balsom speculated that film or video installation by its nature has the potential to experiment with new forms of narrative: ‘The gallery space, with its rejection of start-to-finish viewing and possibility for multiscreen environments, seems especially poised to pioneer the creation of these new narrative forms that might integrate experimental strategies and problematise closure’ (Balsom 2012, 162). By avoiding closure, the image of the criminal created by *Commensal* was not tidily dismissed at the end. In contrast to *Caniba*, the installation version seems a closer fit to the filmmakers’ aspiration to produce an aesthetic that ‘does not necessarily clarify, or leave one with the illusion of “understanding” everyday experience’ (MacDonald 2015, 142). Closure, as an established element of a conventional narrative, creates an order within the experience of watching *Caniba*, ultimately returning the audience from their anxiety to a safe sense of stability based on a collective moral judgement of guilt. Instead of suggesting that there may be a life outside of (and after) the film for Issei Sagawa, which the audience must imagine as the characters walk away from the camera lens, the image of the crime, the bizarre desire that prompted it, and the reciprocal arrangement of trust between the brothers remain fixed in the installation. Unlike *Caniba*, *Commensal* avoids the trap of becoming just another story.

Conclusion

I visited the *Commensal* installation in 2017 having previously been familiar with the work of the Sensory Ethnography Laboratory. My intuition on seeing the installation was that it could have been the best example of what I then understood that the experience of a work of sensory ethnography filmmaking could achieve. Having the convenience and advantage of a comparison between *Commensal* and a feature-length documentary compiled from the same material confirmed my intuition, and also allowed me to ask about the potential of the installation space as a medium for nonfiction and documentary films, in particular films that are made with the intention of actively

communicating by sensory experience rather than by orally, visually and narratively descriptive means. My analysis of the experience of *Commensal* at documenta 14, and the particular elements of the contemporary art installation space revealed that it is more often than not a space of embodied experience, due to its intentional innovation of form and agency of spectatorship. The unique conditions of the experience of the installation space, within the context of its architecture and the socio-historic meanings created by the exhibition, the city, create a new type of experience of a nonfiction work, on that has the genuine potential to subvert the expectation that must carry a semblance of 'knowing reality really' (Cowie 2009, 128). As I have described, the meanings created by *Commensal* are clearly different by those created by *Caniba* – the former can be considered as an experience of subjectively being in the presence of Issei Sagawa and his brother Jun; in their apparent psychological diversions from the normal and in their intimate familial relationship, and the latter as a story about a man who committed a heinous crime and who now carries on indulging in his fetishes while living with his brother in a small apartment. The narrative order of *Caniba*, its packaging as a 'documentary' and the conditions for its experience by an audience either in a cinema auditorium or on a domestic television screen determine that it is read in a different way.

I have argued that by presenting the 'complicated' story of Issei Sagawa *both* as conventional documentary and contemporary art installation, Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel may have inadvertently confirmed the radical potential of the video installation space for nonfiction filmmaking. Of course, the economies of distribution of moving-image artworks and experimental cinema make it impossible for a larger audience to experience *Commensal* as I did in Kassel in 2017, but perhaps it is possible to consider the installation at Tofufabrik as an example of a successful laboratory experiment of sensory nonfiction presentation that revealed the potential for the use of such spaces in such ways on a much more widespread scale.

Notes

1. Lucien Castaing-Taylor has previously adapted elements of documentary work to be screened as part of contemporary art exhibitions, including *Hell Roaring Creek* and *Bedding Down* (2012) which were adapted from the film *Sweetgrass* (2009) made with Isila Barbash and *somniloquies* (2017) made with Véréna Paravel.
2. For a full discussion on site-specificity in contemporary art (Kwon 1997, 88).
3. documenta is an international curated festival of contemporary art that has taken place every five years since 1955 in the city of Kassel in Germany.

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All images included in this paper have been cleared for use in publication by their authors. Image 1: *Tofufabrik, documenta 14, 2017*. Image © Rosa Ruehling. Image 2: Still from *Caniba* and *Commensal, 2017*. Courtesy of Norte Distribution, Paris.

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