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Short Voyages to the Land of Gregarious Animals:
On Political Aesthesia in *Sto Lýko* and *Sweetgrass*

1. THE END (ONE) – It is early morning, shortly after sunrise. Mist blurs the contours of the distant mountain, a damp cloud clinging to its side. The wan light allows no differentiation of the greyish colours. In the foreground, one can see a muddy plain with a puddle of water (it has been raining all through the movie), bordered by a strip of black grass and shrubbery; a rack of three or four bolted steel bars, next to it the silhouette of a small tree with pale blossoms – or is it a dim cluster of houses on the far side of the valley? – and the tin roof of a small shed or stable. This indistinct landscape is cleaved by the strong legs of an electric pylon, on the left, sending forth a sheaf of cables to another, more distant tower, on to another, then to a fourth on the horizon. At the beginning, one can only hear the atmospheric noise of the countryside (the dimensions of space at first daylight), interwoven with faint birdsong – a chaffinch’s series of whistles. Then, the rumble of an opening gate, footsteps on a dirt ground and the muted sound of sheep or goat bells – a dog barking, another one whimpering, a bleating of goats, underlain by a vague metallic clatter. Suddenly, the bells sound more agitated, the bleating and whining more frenzied, and two shots ring out in short succession; the gun is recharged, now in the midst of a pandemonium of animal screams. Two more shots in the yelping chaos, then two more (whenever the shotgun fires, the shadowy trees nearby are briefly illuminated by a glint of muzzle flash) – twelve rounds altogether, until the voices peter out one by one and slowly die away, to the last barks and fading tinkle. All the while, the gaze of the camera remains immobile

and riveted on the scenery of fallow hills and electrical pylons. Only the dull sky seems to brighten ever so slightly, almost imperceptibly, during this three-minute shot ... And before the movie finally cuts to black, the word TELOS appears in white capital letters on the screen, confirming the inevitable and definite termination of life and all its images.¹ This is the way the world ends in *Sto Ljko*: with a bang and, then, with a whimper.

2. THE LAND OF THE PEOPLE – In the wake of the May revolt of 1968 Jacques Rancière embarked on a project to measure the distance between the ‘proletarian’ as conceived by the intellectual left and the historical self-image of the working population since the mid-nineteenth century. However, Rancière’s intention ‘to track down the initial identity of the specific thinking of the working class that the overlay of Marxist discourse had covered up’ (2011: 21) collided with the insight that, although the workers’ pamphlets generally rejected the derogatory or utopian ascriptions imposed by bourgeois discourse, this empirical proletarian identity proved highly heterogeneous and split into countless facets. Moreover, he had to acknowledge that the project was built on a problematic antithesis between historical reality and political dogmatism: ‘It was not a history of voices from below against one of discourse from above, a history of individuals against that of the collectivity, or of spontaneous movements against that of organisations and institutions. It was a history that questioned the very functioning of these pairs of opposites, and also those that opposed realities to representations’ (2011: 13). Considering this close entanglement of actua-

1 *Sto Ljko* contains several apocalyptic references, e.g., the opening voice-over (‘I saw a great epidemic. A chaos. [...] And I’d scream: “People, it’s not going well. Great poverty is coming.”’) or the announcement by one of the goatherds of an old testament ‘revenge ritual’ (‘I’m in agreement with God to look after five hundred goats, and to the electrical pylon, they can go to hell. And I will take my revenge. [...] I’ll shoot them down to cleanse this place.’). In this context, the critic Bert Rebhandl (2013: 29) points to the peculiar double meaning of the Greek word *telos* which not only designates the ending of *Sto Ljko* but implies notions of fate and the unavoidable outcome of a historical process.

lity and discourse, of physical and symbolic forms, it comes as no surprise that Rancière's *Short Voyages to the Land of the People* addresses the proletarian in artistic works from Wordsworth to Rilke and from the Saint-Simonian missionaries (their philanthropic gaze, their thirst for paternal power [2011: 24]) to Roberto Rossellini's *Europe 51*. Here, Rancière does not contrast poetic images of the plebeian with his 'true' existence, but explores strategies of the word and image to *rearrange* the imaginary and factual aspects of work, to relate historical revolution and utopian fantasy in a way which does not simply confirm a prevalent *topos* of the 'people'.

This, then, might raise the question of whether Aran Hughes and Christina Koutsospýrou's documentary *Sto Lýko (To the Wolf, 2013)* undertakes a voyage to a land which might already be mapped according to our notions of the proletarian, whether it offers a preconceived representation of the topographies of poverty, exploitation, futile labour and mere subsistence. In fact, *Sto Lýko* portrays the meagre existence of two married couples living as sheep- and goatherds in Flesouriá, a remote village on the Greek mainland, by presenting the mountains of the Nafpaktía region as a rain-soaked, fog-shrouded, stony wasteland littered with plastic and building rubble, where the herders Giórgos and Adám watch over their freezing flocks. As the film records their lives of scarcity and debt – asking the local shopkeeper for a pound of flour, skinning a kid, weighing the price of a packet of cigarettes against that of a glass of beer, staring at the tablecloth – it unites 'the play of light and cloud with the sensible certainties of politics' (Rancière 2003: 3) and makes the final scene appear as the stringent result of a material and personal decline. Thus far, *Sto Lýko* seems indeed to depict the land of the people in compliance with our darkest image of the worker's misery and provide the dystopian pleasure of a 'recognizable foreignness':

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[We] do not need the villages to be cheerful, the sun shining, or the maid pretty in order to enjoy the voyage. The dull gray of a winter sky upon concrete apartment blocks or the corrugated tin roofs of a shantytown can fulfill the traveler if it presents him with what he has long sought and can immediately recognize, in its very foreignness, as just like what he has already spoken, read, heard, and dreamed: the proletariat in person. (Rancière 2003: 2)

However, the movie's closing sequence – together with a number of instances that focus on the *aesthesis* of the image and its decidedly sensory potential – sets out to rework the relation between the filmic sign and the workers' landscape. It remodels the impoverished model of poverty and produces a sensual experience by introducing an unexpected moment of presence to the otherwise picturesque foreignness of proletarian life. On the one hand, the ending of *Sto Lýko* marks the movie's clear political orientation; it presents the slaughter of animals as provoked by the unrelenting logic of capitalism. On the other hand, the sequence points to the movie's tendency to relate and, at the same time, differentiate between varying sense perceptions, which may correlate with, and sometimes even transcend the audiovisual spectrum of the cinematographic medium. In this way, the result of financial distress becomes an unbearable 'event' which can only take place outside the sphere of representation (a trait of the true event).² Since our article is primarily interested in the interaction of the sensible and concepts of collectivity, the suspension or deflection of the visible at the end of *Sto Lýko*, the irreducible distance between image and sound, might constitute an insightful example for such an encounter of *aesthesis* and politics: on the side of the senses, the cancellation of the 'scene' gives rise to an image of unconnected

2 The event cannot be determined as an object of knowledge, recognition, synthesis or representation. It is rather composed of scattered sensory stimuli, a multiplicity which has not yet constituted a stable empirical object (Vogl 2007: 73).

and autonomous perception – a pure sound situation (*sonsign*), a faltering of all sensory-motor connections.³ But in emphasizing the gap between the agonizingly immobile field of vision and the overwhelming potency of the audible, the image also seems to transgress the framework of socio-political practices based on catenation, progressive development and the balance of ‘values’. The event interferes with both filmic and cultural narratives of exchange; it cannot be integrated in their systems of (dramatic) satisfaction or (monetary) compensation: just as the unbearable moment lies beyond cinematographic action and reaction,⁴ it eludes any economy of accumulation or deprivation: ‘The event relates to nothingness, to the radical lack of any cause or good cause that would reattach it to the rationality of the profits and losses of a collective trauma’ (Rancière 2003: 110-111). The ending of *Sto Ljko* does not invent a mere emotional effect (transplanting the horror from the screen into the viewer’s imagination); it marks the collapse of a motivated, calculable and productive politics of the image.

3. TRUTH – As if it was the movie’s clandestine essence, as if *Sto Ljko* was – illegitimately, cunningly, creatively – taking an approach that in some way demanded justification, the directors and critics incessantly underline its position in the interstice between fact and fiction: Hughes and Koutsospýrou refer to their work as a piece of ‘ethno-fiction’ (2013: 6), the catalogue of the Berlinale Festival describes it as ‘expertly straddling documentary and fiction’ (‘Sto Lyko’, 2013: 222), an announcement for the US premiere at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York calls it ‘a hybrid of documentary and fiction’ (‘Screening’, 2014),⁵ *The Hollywood Reporter* states that it applies ‘the tricks of fiction

3 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 6.

4 Deleuze, *Time-Image*, 2.

5 *Sto Ljko* had its US premiere at the Museum of the Moving Image’s 2014 ‘First Look’-Festival.

to non-fiction' (Dalton 2013).⁶ While the topos may certainly arise from the dividing logic of festival programming, while it harks back to a continuing debate in visual anthropology, from Jean Rouch to the present, about the precarious knowledge claim of the moving image, it also appears strangely – and tellingly – overemphasized. First, this incantation, presupposing a rather sharp-cut concept of filmic authenticity, seems oblivious to the current proliferation of cinematographic crossover genres (docu-fiction, docudrama, mockumentary ...) that provide a discursive field in which *Sto Lýko* could smoothly be integrated and normalized. Robert Koehler (2009) even postulates a 'period of the cinema of in-between-ness': 'In the brave new world of films that have escaped from the categories of "narrative" and "documentary," the matter at hand isn't one of – to use another quotable word – "reality." [...] Rather, the issue in its most direct sense concerns what is recorded visually and audibly'. Second, the consentaneity concerning fictionalization in *Sto Lýko* refers to a number of formal strategies which interfere with 'reality' to such a negligible extent that one can hardly accuse the movie of a discernible contamination of actuality with elements of fiction: the asserted 'casting' entails nothing more than the directors' becoming involved with the two families of herders that the movie will consequently focus on. And the 'lay acting' is obviously limited to certain minor instants, possibly the momentary positioning of a figure at the sink or kitchen table ... beyond that, the persons' demeanour, diction and mannerisms, their everyday routines and even their gazing at the camera seem entirely unswayed by any instruction. In fact, what might be called 'fiction' (implicating, in this case, not so much 'invention' as the structuring of material) is primarily a result of the editing process: according to Hughes and Koutsospýrou (2013: 6), the

6 Cf. the directors' interview included in the movie's press kit (2013: 6): 'For us the magic of filmmaking is selling the audience a trick that they willingly, wholeheartedly accept. The closer we can get to making this convincing, the better the magic trick.'

shooting time of more than four months was thus compressed into a plot duration of only four days. However, instead of distorting chronology, the temporal contraction rather makes for an altogether non-representational or ‘musical’ cohesion of the film’s components. It creates a subtle rhythm, an unobtrusive alternation of light and dark, of outdoor spaces and interiors. This rhythm does not pertain to physical or human time (to the alternation of night and day which is only of interest with regard to the persistent question of what to eat tomorrow and how to pay for it). It unfolds in the structure of the film itself, generating an immeasurable pace of images, a cadence of similarities and repetitions, of daily tasks and empty moments which are correlated to a certain lighting and backdrop. In this way, a single day becomes an indeterminate period; it loses its narrative outlines and opens out into an undecided time of waiting.⁷

In contrast, however, to all the explicitly named (but, in fact, rather restrained) aspects of fictionalization, the most evident example always goes unmentioned: the ending of *Sto Lýko* points conspicuously to its own constructedness, to the gap between the event and its mediation, by accentuating the involved sensory material of image and sound. In so doing, the film seems to summarize its ambivalent stance toward realism; following Rancière – who, for that matter, addresses the issue with respect to literature, Michelet, Proudhon and Rilke – it confronts the affiliation of ‘truth’ to a ‘prosaic’ image with a shift to the ‘lyrical’: prose follows a myth, namely the identification of word (or image) with the world, giving ‘a place, the most natural one of all, [...] where separation is erased, where the order of discourse exactly and naturally corresponds to the order of things and their properties’ (2003: 98-99). Prose advocates the utopian belief ‘in the self-evidence of the hearth and the people, of science and la-

7 Likewise, the interlocking of the film’s beginning (a shadowy back view, in early morning light, of the goatherd Giórgos with a shotgun slung over his shoulder) and ending creates a dramatic circular structure only with a second viewing, the initial shot being too indistinct and undemonstrative to provide a recognizable motif.

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bor, race and progress' (99). Meanwhile, the poetic mode 'shows us the great fable, the great myth – the speech that says the thing, that is the welcomed thing – but [it] does so to manifest its radical strangeness' (98). In contrast to the ordinary conjunction of signs, it exhibits its gaps and blanks that always threaten to tip over into nothingness, an irremediable distance of the sensible and the aesthetic (Rancière calls it the division of voices and enjoyments). While the modern utopia of prose, 'the ordinary suture that holds together the discourse of politics or social science' (99), works with realism and hides all operations which could push its mirage into visibility, the poetic mode never abolishes the space between the 'enjoyment' of the image and the possession of things and beings. Against this backdrop, *Sto Lýko's* closing sequence challenges the assumption of a representation that gathers everything and leaves no rest. On the contrary, it locates the greater physical, moral, economic or political 'truth' in the decomposition of image and sound, image and world. While it passes from documentary prose to fictional lyricism, it redefines the interval as the legitimate 'nonplace' of reality.

But one might even go one step further – from the (Rancièrian) reevaluation of the realist and poetic modes in cinema to the experimental erasure of their opposition. The ending of *Sto Lýko*, the killing of the animals, forcefully exceeds the movie's previously marked-out frame and every genre-based expectation. Its ethical as well as audiovisual impact transcends the opposition of *facta* and *ficta* and, thus, elucidates why the sequence is hardly ever mentioned in discussions about the film's ontological status – for can it matter whether this image of absolute collapse is conveyed as documentary or fiction? If it attempts to connote the 'real' (the unspeakable beyond representation, an uncontrolled and violent horror), can it still differentiate between reality and its imaginary doubling? According to the critic Robert Bell (2013), the movie's eventual resolution 'jolts the system' and interferes with its 'air of utmost

authenticity [...] It's as though Hughes and Koutsospyrou have deliberately [...] subverted the sense of safety that a documentary, free from extreme dramatic shifts or heightened moments of stylistic contrast, generates, exploiting our complacency and comfort in narrative form by shifting it unexpectedly to hyperbolize the sense of anguish felt in a climate of economic implosion'. But although Bell concedes that this calculated effect gives integrity to an otherwise 'slightly pretentious nod to status quo observation', his analysis adheres to a distinction which may fall short of the film's closing sequence. Its affective and aesthetic tremors undermine the (always) too confident divisions in the field of genre and, with it, their political implications – that something has to be *done* in the face of *reality*; that one can be rightfully 'moved' when it is only fiction. The directors' insistence on the 'semi-fictional' character of their work answers to a critical convention. Meanwhile, it is *Sto Lýko*'s most obviously fictionalized moment that no longer accords with the question of fictionalization: the event has rendered it obsolete.

4. DISPLACEMENT ACTIVITY – Another long take of three minutes and fifteen seconds: the immobile camera fixates on Spiridóula Katsaróu as she sits on a weather-bleached plastic chair in her back yard at dusk and talks to her husband, the old shepherd Ilías, who, off-screen, has just come home. The exchanges of their dialogue (will you put the sheep inside? – I've brought wood for the night – go to bed if you feel sleepy – did you drink anything today?) are so scattered, a weary quotidian habit, their coherence is so loose that the dead times and silences in between begin to spread and occupy the scene's centre: the pared down utterances give way to a study of a woman sitting. However, this inactivity is far from static. It transforms Spiridóula's body into a complex of unconnected operations, creating a multiplicity of micro-movements and random sorties to the closest surrounding objects. She rubs her wrists; leans forward; reaches out to touch the armrest of a nearby chair; sits

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back; fingers the seam of her headscarf, the tip of her nose; clasps and unclasps her hands; kicks away a chicken (Go to hell you); coughs; turns sideways; strokes her face; fastens her headscarf; grabs the chairback; looks at the ground; leans back; scrutinizes her wristwatch; massages her eyelids; arranges a strand of hair under the scarf; touches the adjoining chair; strokes her belly, the pockets of her dressing gown; kicks a chicken; sways sideways, rubs her hands; clears her throat (a mechanical series of seven harrumphs); breathes in deeply; touches the nearby chair, her chin; rocks to and fro; closes her eyes; opens them wide; taps her hand up and down; moans; slaps the armrest; swipes a chicken off the adjoining chair; feels her fingers and jawline; scratches her nose; jiggles the chair, clears her throat; stands and then staggers inside.

This agonizingly prolonged sequence of arbitrary activities has two effects: on the one hand, it generates an intensity which extends from the woman to the viewer's own corporality. The motions of her body, their loss of intent and fragmented rhythms, do not only externalize a breathless, knotted consciousness that is helplessly chained to physicality. They also involve the interior of the recipient who – through an affectation which goes beyond 'empathy' in transmitting distress from one subject directly to another – reacts with a decidedly somatic uneasiness. This reaction appears as a specific variant of what Jennifer Barker describes as the shared 'viscera' of viewer and film. For Barker the vital organs of the non-anthropomorphic body of cinema consist of its inner and uncontrollable workings, the power supply, light source, transport mechanism, which 'keep light and celluloid moving through the camera and projector' (2009: 127) and correspond to the unconscious pulse of the human internal organs: both visceral complexes communicate via receptive points of contact between the film's body and that of the spectator. Meanwhile, the peculiarity of the scene in *Sto Lýko* arises not so much from the fact that, here, our corporality is occupied by the silent turmoil of a diegetic figure (instead of

cinema's underlying medial rhythm) as from the pronounced *muting* of this rhythm. We may indeed be affected by the woman's dull agitation and respond with equal 'gut-wrenching' inertia;⁸ but we are, to at least the same extent, irritated by the absence of a marked modulation of the *image*. Whereas Barker's concept of cinematographic viscera relies on the deep structure and interlocking components of the film apparatus, *Sto Lýko* is shot in digital HD and screened in Quicktime format which lacks all mechanical pulsation; whereas cinema's cadences might also manifest themselves through visual or editing patterns, the scene in *Sto Lýko* dispenses with montage in favour of one single long take. Thereby, the inexorable gaze of the camera seems to induce a peculiar stagnation in both the flow of representation and the rhythms of the spectator's body. They hesitate and founder, leaving us with an uncomfortable feeling of nervous stasis. We no longer adopt the vital pulse of the film, we are hollowed out by its barrenness.

On the other hand, such repeated moments of arrhythmia coincide with the movie's overall political impetus. All of Spiridoula's micro-movements attest to a limitation of agency, reducing it to a series of non-directional and ineffectual motions. In this context, touching a chair's armrest or rubbing her hands appear as gestures to reassure the subject of its own and the world's existence, but not as components of a coherent process. They are 'substitute activities', triggered by the impossibility of affecting actuality or completing a purposeful line of action. In the face of a deadlock, of a living condition that is radically cut off from all options of social and economic improvement, the behaviour out of context marks a branch line; it diverts to objectless performances – a form of expression which is almost imperceptible since it is located at the periphery of the sensible

8 This is in accordance with the film's obvious interest in bodily functions (chewing food, drinking, smoking, flatulating); they are always – and often blatantly – staged as strong stimuli to spontaneously affect the spectator's corporal sensibility.

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(a location which, however, can be revealed by the film image: the arrangement of social bodies, what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible, ‘sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not’ [1999: 29]. While the herder families have no part in the sensible, the film’s political operation ‘makes visible what had no business being seen’ [30]). The displacement activity and uncontrolled quirks prove to be the result of a general deed- and speechlessness. They occur on the other side of – filmic as well as political – discourse or action, where every start leads to its immediate abortion. Just as the ‘event’, in the last sequence of *Sto Lýko*, defies the narrative logic of connection and exchange, the scene depicts a specific aberration or exclusion from an expressional norm. And again, this undoubtedly political act, the visualisation of a profound obstruction, is closely connected to the sensory.

5. THE ANIMAL: SIDEWARDS / DOWNWARDS – Another long take of almost three and a half minutes: right after the movie’s title in white letters on black ground, we see a herd of goats huddled in the rain on a narrow country road: wet tarmac and trees, a row of telephone poles to the left, a low house to the right, two men in camouflage, with their shepherd’s crooks and umbrellas. Since the camera is positioned at the eye level of the animals that fill the lower half of the screen, every once in a while, one of them turns its head and seems to look directly at the spectator. A similar shot stands at the beginning of Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor’s 2009 documentary *Sweetgrass*: just before the title – white capital letters on black ground – we see a flock of sheep in a snow-covered rural landscape: some scraggy bushes, a line of black fir-trees in the distance. Now and then, some of the ruminating sheep glance briefly at the camera, until the film cuts to a single animal, with thick fleece and a massive wooden collar and bell. It chews, then turns to the audience and returns its look without moving.



The two films share several aspects regarding their contents and contexts: *Sweetgrass*, produced by the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University, follows the last trail of shepherders in Montana's Absaroka-Beartooth mountains. Similar to *Sto Lýko*, it focuses on the working life of one shepherding family (the Allestads and their farm hands). Shot over three years (from 2001 to 2003) and then condensed to a narrated time of about four months, *Sweetgrass* records a vanishing way of living and traditional labour. It too takes a political stance in the context of a global capitalist economy, but refuses to convey it in literal means, instead deflecting it to the sphere of the sensory. And in both cases, when we regard the goat or sheep looking at us, this experience sets up a central theme, the relation of human and animal: the image establishes an unnameable correspondence which remains poised between recognition and absolute remoteness, the trace of a 'lost intimacy' – states Jean-Christophe Bailly (2011: 10), quoting Bataille – which 'comes straight from the abyss that separates us from animals whenever we meet them [...]'. Yet something is still on the alert, or is still ready to awaken, something that recognizes itself in an animal's gaze or

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something that we grasp in passing, in a stable in winter'. However, from this shared moment on, the two films explore the species divide in different directions.

Sweetgrass looks sideways to discover the animal. The movie's first section certainly seems to delineate a system of submission and 'biopolitics' – the shearing of sheep on a piece-rate basis, with the animals jammed between the shearer's knees, the men themselves hanging in supports of metal bars and padded leather belts, or the bottle feeding and reallocation of lambs to mother sheep in tight stalls, where young animals are literally flung onto a moist and yellowish newborn to take on its odour. However, there is something about the brown light and the closeness between the men and the sheep, about their stillness and the almost tender dexterity of the working process, which counters the extensive logistics of animal reproduction and the sustainment of life, the quasi-industrial redistributions of fostering and care to 'make live and let die'. According to Anna Grimshaw, these sequences give up the dominating stance of ethnographic exegesis and locate themselves 'at ground level' to 'document a series of highly skilled operations in which people, animals, and machines become so intertwined that it is often difficult to tell one part from another' (2011: 250). Above all, it is the intimate look of the camera, moving pliantly among the animals, evoking the dry, salty smell of the shed and the warmth of the bodies, that retransforms the mere commodity into a living being. Moreover, the subsequent part, depicting the long and arduous trailing of sheep through mountain forests to the upland meadows, turns further away from human ordinance and portrays the common route of men and animals as a fluent exchange of signs and shared movements (to illustrate a similar poetic shift from synthesized images of coexistence to an aesthetics that considers, protects and rehabilitates the small, non-ideological instances of a political journey, Rancière refers to certain heterarchical traits in Wordsworth's late oeuvre – 'this path, / A little hoary line and faintly traced, / Work, shall we call

it, of the shepherd's foot / Or of his flock? – joint vestige of them both⁹). *Sweetgrass* may, in fact, not follow a path that accrues from, and attests to such a romantic indistinguishability of the humble traces of culture and nature; furthermore, the film may give little reason to identify, as does Grimshaw (2011: 250), the landscape and sheep, rather than people, as the 'crucial elements' in its narrative. Nonetheless, *Sweetgrass* pays close attention to the connectedness of both realms, to the moments of a sensory proximity and barely codified communication 'in a complex multispecies landscape' (Fijn 2012: 75).¹⁰ It makes the men travel alongside the sheep; it explores their mutual influence, calls, patterns and paths. The animal appears in a lateral view: stepping and looking aside allows the image to escape the anthropocentric regime; at times moving among the sheep's nervous legs, brushing against their flanks, pushing in between their bodies, at other times registering the herd's changing shape from afar, its torrential flow, stagnation or scattered clusters, its similarity to other natural dynamics, 'from avalanches and the sliding sands on a dune to the steady train of ants on the move' (Koehler 2009), announces a shift from 'ideological discourse' to 'critical *aesthesis*'.

Meanwhile, *Sto Lýko* looks downward to discover the animal. On the face of it, the film seems to relegate non-human species to the very margin of the image, thus ratifying the prevalent narrative in modernity of the increasing inaccessibility of animals that recede in the human imagination proportionally to their

9 William Wordsworth, 'To the Clouds', quoted in Rancière, *Short Voyages*, 22-23.

10 In her manifesto on 'multi-species', 'multi-sensory', 'etho-ethnographic' film-making, Natasha Fijn locates this exchange 'between the cowboys and their horses, dogs and all-important sheep' mainly on the level of sound: 'The sounds add to an embodied feeling of being somehow a part of the muster with the barking of the dogs, the endless calling of mother sheep to their nearly fully grown lambs and a nervous horse's hooves as they clatter across a rushing stream, accompanied by the soft sounds of encouragement of its rider' (2012: 75).

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becoming a mere commodity.¹¹ Although the film depicts the life of goatherds, it features noticeably few scenes or plot components that take notice of animals as presences in their own right. However, the location of the animal is not simply eliminated, but liable to a specific structural treatment consisting in the systematic emptying and subsequent reoccupation of that position. The former operation is indicated by the animals' prime function in *Sto Lýko* – they die. Giórgos, under the pillars of one of the electric pylons, opens the gurgling throat of a kitten with his knife, grabs an air pump from his car, inflates the carcass, breaks its hip joints with his knees to prepare the skinning. Adám's wife Kikí kicks a rolled-up hedgehog down a dirt road, then – since it is too small to make a meal – steps on it with both her boots; her husband shouts that it will burst. A dying cow lies flat on the ground next to a rusty lorry and sheet metal hut; one of the peasant labourers unbuckles its bell collar, lifts the animal's heavy head which, without support, falls back with a hollow thump – all this a haunting exposition to the final killing of sheep. Evidently, *Sto Lýko* relocates the dying animals in proximity to inanimate objects. It presents them as pure matter subjected to physical forces, exhibiting their elasticity, internal pressure, yielding to gravity. This objectification is part of a general displacement on the film's vertical scale (a vectorial equivalent to its eschatological orientation); it illustrates how the elements of the depicted world are constantly moving downwards in their ontological order.

Accordingly, the second step is the occupation by the human of the position vacated by the animal: *Sto Lýko* confronts the viewer with characters that are determined by their bare and withered corporality, intuitive actions and impenetrable surface. While men and women inhabit the movie's centre, they are presented as dense (and sometimes even repulsive) bodies resistant to our gaze – an opacity which exceeds the frequent

11 Belinda Smaill, 'Documentary Film and Animal Modernity in *Raw Herring* and *Sweetgrass*', *Australian Humanities Review* 57 (2014), 61-80, here 62-63.

closedness of the face in ethnographic images and conveys the vague impression of a profound illegibility. What John Berger says about the disquieting experience of exchanging looks with an animal – having ‘secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man’¹² – seems thoroughly transferable to our encounter with the human faces in *Sto Ljko*.



Meanwhile, this association of man with animal must not be understood as a denigration of the human characters who expose themselves to the documentary gaze (at best, such an exposure could claim to reproduce a long abraded discourse by presenting a thoroughly ideological image of unreasoning poverty, by portraying the *rustici* in their hut as child or animal:¹³ the voyage to the land of the people would reveal little more than an established idea; the – well-meaning, malicious – gaze ‘comes to incarnate itself, in [...] a living scene, in order to make a

12 John Berger, quoted in Ratner, ‘Once Grazing, Now Gone’, 23.

13 Rancière, *Short Voyages*, 72.

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concept present' [Rancière 2003: 2]). Likewise, the downward shift in the relation between man and animal does not presuppose a violent expulsion of the latter which would, again, imply a basic ignobility of the former. Instead of degrading the humans or bemoaning the animals, *Sto Lýko* presents a realignment of positions within a representational structure: man becomes animal *to the same degree* that the animal becomes an object – not so much in a moral as in a strictly relational or relative sense. On the whole, this strategy establishes a specific direction, a verticality that no longer places the position 'animal' next to, but underneath the position 'man'.¹⁴ Such verticality is more than a mere reflection of a hierarchical system that accounts for pauperism and its trials. Rather, the look downwards becomes another way of moving off to the side in the sense of Rancière: it marks a deviation which is not guided by a confident political consciousness, but affords an opportunity for sensual awareness of another 'life' – and while Rancière demonstrates this move from consciousness to awareness, from a Marxist framework to the unexpected discovery of a precarious existence, with reference to Irene, the protagonist in *Europe 51* (2003: 121), *Sto Lýko* translates her mo(ve)ment of insight from the diegesis to the image. Now, all the movie's instances of tangible 'cruelty', sensual 'abjection', animalistic 'impenetrability' pose the question of power by making it perceptible. Hierarchy is more than a representational regime; the animal, at once resistant and subdued, is not merely the focal point of the film's general socio-economic and socio-ecological argumentation; the figure of the 'animal' is rather

14 Scott MacDonald's interview with Barbash and Castaing-Taylor confirms that an association of man and animal does not necessarily result in the deprecation of the human: in the case of *Sweetgrass*, a way of giving equal weight to people and animals is 'to anthropomorphize sheep, and simultaneously to bestialize human-ity' (2013: 274). What is more, Lucien Castaing-Taylor traces back this filmic strategy to a tradition of breeding over the millennia and the species' 'inter-twined naturecultures' (273) which permit no distinction 'between "people" and "sheep." It's more that we're so many variations of "sheeple"' (274).

found in the place where such a politics coincides with the senses.

6. DIAGRAM – A well-established strategy in classicist and romantic landscape painting is the integration of carefully placed human figures that open up the depicted space, lead the beholder's gaze and reflect or concentrate a specific inner attitude towards the scenery (the function remains largely unaltered – independent of the classicist mode of staging a character's presence in the scene and romanticism's conception of a figure rapt before the prospect). Evidently, the two films under consideration appropriate and modulate this practice: *Sto Lýko* examines varying degrees of depth, especially by positioning a shrunken figure in the panorama's mid- or background, *Sweetgrass* – regardless of a number of shots that reveal an unmodified painterly vision¹⁵ (the much-quoted telephone call by the cowboy Pat Connolly from a grandiose mountaintop) – closes in on the herders and their immediate surroundings. Both the distancing and the intrusive treatment interfere with the picturesque relation between figure and landscape and, thus, have a distinct effect on the image's aesthetic value: just as the long shot in *Sto Lýko* inhibits identification with the characters, *Sweetgrass*'s frequent back views of a shepherd no longer allow access to the visual field; instead, the tableau is obstructed by the rough fabric of an overcoat, the back of a head and Stetson, a clothed pair of shoulders, the broad body of a horse. As a result, the viewer's perception oscillates between the repeatedly frustrated urge to visually explore the scenery and the irritating proximity of surfaces. Such instances seem to absorb the

15 Koehler (2011) mentions Jean-François Millet, whose paintings introduced the realities of physical labour and the working poor in the field to the romantic pastoral, as a precursor of *Sweetgrass*. Ratner discovers overtones of the melancholy landscapes of Corot and Constable who 'painted pastoral scenes at the height of the industrial revolution' (2010: 27). Grimshaw states that the 'camera work is self-conscious in a painterly style, with a marked sensitivity to light, composition, and framing' (2011: 252).

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alternating rhythm of panorama and detail from the film's macro-structure and condense it into one single image: the shot begins to vibrate due to a peculiar and discomfoting tension between the concealment of space and the disclosure of material.



At other occasions, the indeterminate relation of perspective and texture cancels the figure altogether, creating an entirely material and non-psychological image: the terms that Worringer uses to define a fundamental opposition in the visual arts (and which Gilles Deleuze adopts to characterize two alternative aspects of the time-image, the 'constat' and 'instat') are 'abstraction' and '*Einfühlung*' (Deleuze 1989: 6). The latter is not only connected to an empathetic involvement or subjective rapport; it also associates a particular kind of image that Deleuze describes as a 'close, flat-on vision'. Yet *Sweetgrass* finds a way to disengage flatness from immersion or imaginary identification without succumbing to the abstract. Shadowy contours in an unshaped darkness or the radiant glare of backlighting, a dense cloud of dust or web of branches, the screen-filling texture of sheep in close-up or a far-off monochrome mountain-side stud-

ded with animals produce a heterogeneous plane which removes the image from the Deleuzian *instat* (in the films of Fellini) and brings it more into line with his concept of the *manual* (in the paintings of Bacon): the image ‘remains a visual reality, but what is imposed on sight is a space without form and a movement without rest, which the eye can barely follow, and which dismantles the optical’ (2003: 155). At first, such patterns of crowded bodies or foggy particles in *Sweetgrass* seem to conform to Laura Marks’s notion of ‘haptic images’¹⁶ that resist the control of vision, for example by being blurry, invite the viewer to explore them through all of the senses (2002: 118) and, therefore, ‘do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship’ (3). However, although she emphasizes that in most processes of seeing both the haptic and optical visuality are involved in a dialectical movement, the *manual* introduces a precise intermediate stage between the two poles by designating a specific perception which subordinates the eye to the hand without completely transforming it into an organ of touch.¹⁷ Thus, *Sweetgrass*’s diagrammatic images – ‘diagram’ being Bacon/Deleuze’s term for a catastrophic obfuscation of space made up of insubordinate color-patches and traits (2003: 156) – tend to the haptic, but retain their visuality;

16 Laura Marks connects the ‘haptic image’ to the Deleuzian time-image, first, because it ‘forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative’, second, because it can be understood as a kind of ‘affection-image that lends itself to the time-image cinema. Recall that the affection-image, while it usually extends into action, may also force a visceral and emotional contemplation in those any-spaces-whatever divorced of action’ (2000: 163). While this association appears productive, but rather sketchy, Marks’s notion of haptic visuality could perhaps have profited from Deleuze’s differentiation between the *digital*, *tactile*, *manual* and *haptic* in painting (2003: 154).

17 In contrast to the *manual*, one can ‘speak of the *haptic* whenever there is no longer a strict subordination in either direction [...], but when sight discovers in itself a specific function of touch that is uniquely its own, distinct from its optical function’ (Deleuze 2003: 155).

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they neither generate a new figure, nor do they shed all figuration.¹⁸

A similar sensory modulation occurs when *Sto Lýko* presents its exteriors in a blar and bluish haze, its interiors as crammed diagrams of outlines and surfaces with an often limited depth of field. It is, above all, the lightless room, hung with pieces of patterned drapery, sheets, blankets and plastic bags, piled with clothes, dishes, picture frames, beer cans, that suspends spatial distinctions and vanishing lines. Even the presence of a human figure does little to clarify the shot size or proportions since it is often cut off by the frame, fragmented or subsides in the dim background. And just like *Sweetgrass*, the film uses the long take not only to comply with the 'observational mode' of documentary cinema; its insistent gaze rather operates as a relay insofar as it blocks the trajectories of plot and optical space and redirects them to duration and manual perception: the static and unchanging image, the abandonment of narrative space and perspective¹⁹ cause a shift to a kind of 'feeling' which neither orients itself in a visual field nor 'sympathizes' with a figure. Instead of receiving the spectator in its open field, the shot closes itself off; instead of *Einführung*, it creates *Führung*.

18 In the Deleuzian reading of Bacon's work, the painter starts with a *figuration* (the idea of a resemblance); then the *diagram* intervenes (a scrambling or non-representative obliteration of the 'intended' figurative outlines) to give birth to a completely different *figure* (the whole series of relations in the final painting which contains the traits of the original figuration without merely translating it into another form) (2003: 157). Other than this aesthetic process, the diagrammatic film image still contains the *figuration* (landscape, sheep); however, from its pool of indeterminability no discernible *figure* emerges.

19 In fact, the two aspects of narration and spatiality seem historically inseparable: Rancière, in his exploration of the 'sensible' as an intersection of politics and aesthetics, describes painting's adoption of the third dimension – in the *repre-sentational regime* of the Renaissance – as the assertion of art's ability to capture an act of 'living' speech: 'The reproduction of optical depth was linked to the privilege accorded to the *story*' (2004: 15-16).



This shift – from empathy to feeling and from story to diagram – evokes a political practice which goes beyond the ethical or representative. It transitions from an ‘idea’ of herding and poverty, of social and natural landscapes, into a novel perception of these landscapes that may resemble the previous concept, but, at the same time, is entirely different. While Jacques Rancière declares that his *Short Voyages* are concerned with ‘the signs by which a gaze [...] comes to recognize reality as exemplary of the idea’ (2003: 2), the other half of his project consists in searching for that curious and uninformed gaze which ‘displaces the angle of vision, [...] undoes the certainties of place, and thereby reawakens the power present in each of us to become a foreigner on the map of places and paths generally known as reality’ (3). One way to abandon the ideological image and loosen what had been bound together by political representation is the – verbal as well as visual – reorientation towards the small, resistant particles of reality, towards the *thing* which has not yet been translated into a discursive or narrative *object*. Rancière delineates this turn with respect to Wordsworth (who first merges the light and sky of France with the certainties of the land’s revolutionary politics and then takes back his words and figures and develops a ‘new lyricism of simple things’ [23] to counter the impoverished images of his own utopian enthusiasm

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with a rediscovery of, and responsibility for the concrete). And he assigns the same competence to film: in contrast to the representative corset of fiction, Rancière locates the aesthetic truth of cinema in the ambiguity of ephemeral and silent things emancipating themselves in their signifying nature; the aesthetic image is the scene of a non-hierarchical semiosis in which words, bodies and things lose their recognisability and become foreign.²⁰ Another, yet closely connected way to implement what he describes as ‘recognizable foreignness’ is indeed attached to a Deleuzian strategy of affectation through the diagram, the transition from conceptual representation to sense perception: following Tom Conley and his reading of Rancière’s juxtaposition of ideas and sensory affects,

ideation is lost when the image, bearing unpredictable sensorial latency, touches the nervous system directly, without the mediation of a plot set in motion by characters expressing their feelings and drives. Using what Deleuze called a logic of sensation to alter the inherited meanings of montage, he shows how the affective charge that the spectator experiences of the image [...] causes cinema to become ‘more soberly the art that guarantees the decomposition and non-mimetic re-composition of the elements of mimetic effects.’ (2009: 220)

Thus, the material image in *Sto Lýko* and *Sweetgrass* offers a twofold critical impetus. It can divert our perception from perspective to detail and from the visual to the multi-sensory. The land of the people is not reproduced (a picture, a map) but reinvented as an assemblage, a partially accessible world that eludes the general survey in terms of a realist (i.e. utopian) conscience.

20 Sulgi Lie: ‘Die widerständige Fiktion’ [The Resistant Fiction], in Jacques Rancière, *Und das Kino geht weiter: Schriften zum Film* [And the Cinema Goes On: Writings on Film], ed. by Sulgi Lie and Julian Radlmaier (Berlin: August, 2012), 199-215, here 201.

7. LASS MICH IN RUHE MEINE SCHAFE WEIDEN²¹ – When Irene, in *Europe 51*, travels to the land of the people, she finds it just at the terminus of the Roman tramway: it is not necessary to change the décor and atmosphere, to visit those family celebrations, bistros and popular dances that usually allow us to recognize the people in person.²² *Sto Lýko*, however, has to cover a greater distance to reach the Nafpaktia region where ‘Central Greece’ appears as a rather remote object of ethnography at the margins of present-day society and bearable existence. And *Sweetgrass* discovers agrarian labour at the northernmost periphery of the United States where farming and wilderness merge in a space that transforms the depicted work culture into a physically intimate, but geographically (and historically) removed frontier experience.

The outer and inner distance to these borderlands – which in both films is undercut and, at the same time, conveyed by the emphasis on the sensory – also manifests itself in the use of technical media, in their position, range, operation and connection to our familiar reality. They serve to measure the extension of the depicted space and indicate its precarious separation from the median world, from its subjects, techniques and discourses. Accordingly, the peripheral social sphere in *Sto Lýko* seems defined by a permanent disturbance of communication channels: great efforts have to be made (Who is it? ... Who is it? ... Who is it? ... I don’t understand) to identify the nameless voice when Giórgos receives a telephone call on a hilltop beneath a softly humming high-voltage power line. On the mountain road his car stereo is in constant danger of losing the signal and falling back into static noise. There is a persistent stripe of snowy distortions on the television screen in the family’s sitting room until, finally, the image collapses for good. The

21 ‘I ask thee, let me tend my sheep in silence’ (Moses’ initial answer to the voice from the burning bush in Arnold Schönberg’s *Moses und Aron*, Act 1, Scene 1 – ‘The Calling of Moses’).

22 Rancière, *Short Voyages*, 112.

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Páxnis's neighbour Vasilikí must hold the portable receiver to her ear to follow a weather report interrupted by heavy interference. First and foremost, the ubiquity of poor reception inhibits the exchange with, and cognition of those instances which – through entirely different channels – exert influence on the herders' life. The repeatedly audible snippets of reports about the economic 'crisis', banks and politics remain fragmentary or barely comprehensible; background noise in the labourers' fringe existence. This generates a similarly fragmented and distorted conception of one's own embedment in the 'circumstances', to a quasi-magical apprehension of indistinct political as well as historical linkages that connect the centre to the periphery. First, Giórgos attributes the white noise on the TV screen to the poor signal, then, in a seamless causal nexus, to a strike of the broadcasting station's employees, then to the machinations of felonious politicians, leading to the phantasm of a dictatorial past in which Colonel Papadopoulos fixes all deficiencies of the state (and, perhaps, the television signal). Quite literally, the noise absorbs the differences on which signs and information are based, the technical – and political – distinguishability that could restore the interrelations between discriminate images, words, things and people and reintroduce them to the tight block of 'being'.



In *Sweetgrass*, on the other hand, the signal seems stable – Pat Connolly can call his mother via satellite link. Nonetheless, the film is pervaded by the crackling noise of radio communication and inarticulate voices from the ether when the cowboys inform each other over long distances about the direction, pace and spread of the flock; large parts of the journey of men and sheep are underlain with a thick acoustic web of bleating, hoofbeats, barking, breathing, cursing, singing, rushing water and the sibilance of walkie-talkies woven into its elaborate patterns. This illustrates how the issue of good or poor reception, of a sea of noise and islands of information, concerns not only the *diegetic* media, but also the *film itself* as signal. When Giórgos (in *Sto Lýko*) or Pat and John Ahern (in *Sweetgrass*) are confronted with the noises of nature and technology, these instances become ‘sonic images’ of the two movies’ general concepts of in/distinctness: *Sto Lýko* projects a fundamentally diffuse universe. Corresponding to its rain-swept images, which are ever inclined to drown in greyness, the wind is continually blowing, rain taps on the umbrella, the wireless hisses. The contours of objects, sounds and speech are reduced to bleak images of an all-encompassing depression, turning the movie into a photo- and phonogram of economic and mental distress. This, too, is why *Sto Lýko* seeks the adhesion of sound and image. Their basic contiguity creates more than a ‘utopian’ realism of bodies and matching voices, of the object as source of noise – ‘a world in which [...] all speech is the murmur of a well or the voice of a grave and makes manifest the configuration of a place or the state of a subject’ (Ranci re 2003: 99-100). Rather, it is a matter of compacting, of fusing the visual and audible components of the image, so that everything is included in a tightly synthesized world.²³ Even the occasional extra-diegetic use of music does not

23 One does not always see what one hears: an exterior shot of a coffee house may be accompanied by the dialogue of the men inside; during the close-up of a customer, one might hear the off-voice of a person addressing him. However, sound and image remain in close contact; even their detachment functions as medial deixis: it indicates the here and now.

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break up this composite, but contributes to the movie's density. In the meantime, *Sweetgrass* creates an acoustic terrain which constantly differentiates and fans out the distances of sounds, their sources, frequencies and pitch. Much has been said about the film's intricate sound-design:²⁴ while speech and sound are usually in sync with the image, Castaing-Taylor's recording technique – putting up to eight wireless microphones on people and animals – creates a characteristic tension between them and dismisses the naturalist tradition of an alignment of acoustical and optical perspectives:

In the first place, because lavalier mics are so close to the sound source, they result in this very subjective, guttural, highly embodied sound. [...] One other quality of recording with so many lavs that jumped out at me while shooting was the absurd, often completely surreal synchronicities that would result. The transmitters we used were 250 millawatt [sic], the most powerful that are legal in the U.S., which would transmit a signal to me from up to a mile and a half away. So I could be simultaneously recording with four lavs up to three miles away from each other, none of which might suggest anything whatsoever in common with what the camera was recording through its lens. (MacDonald 2013: 278-279)

Thus, synchronicity becomes a collaged soundscape which may convey 'the complex, nonlinear work that each aspect of sheep-tending involves' (Ratner, 2010: 25). But it also defines a broadly marked training ground for the perception of sounds, their interferences, superimpositions, harmonies, micro-differences, merging and dissolving: their tight compound formulates a request to discriminate.

Following Robert Koehler (2009), it seems hard to determine whether this analytic strategy is a form of staging, a more precise method of documenting, or 'something else'. In any case, it pro-

24 Cf., for example, Grimshaw, 'The Bellwether Ewe', 252-253; Koehler, 'Sweetgrass'; Ratner, 'Once Grazing, Now Gone', 25-26, etc.

duces a specific political surplus value. As a guiding model for its description, one can refer to Ute Holl's reading of, listening to, looking at Straub/Huillet's 1974 adaptation of Schönberg's *Moses und Aron* which does not explore 'the meaning of sounds or images, but the quality of the connectivity between notes and film shots [...] to reveal the underlying, yet non-perceptible structure or order of possible relations in an artwork or practice'²⁵ (2014: 58, our translation). While power always manifests itself in violent disruptions between solid entities, Schönberg's opera and Straub/Huillet's film imply a potential of political resistance through acoustic and optical operations that demand attentiveness, accurate distinctions and response. Since all the components of the final movie – the voices, instruments, choir, sounds, images – are recorded separately, they result in an experimental sensory field which is constituted of minimal frictions and interferences. This aesthetic arrangement designates a political approach: with respect to the protagonist Moses, it 'puts seeing and hearing to the test in their relation to legality and submission'²⁶ (59). The very first scene translates the unity of divine law into a noise of irreducible and unintelligible sounds and phonemes, so that Moses has to decide whether he hears the voice of God or the rustling of nature:

Thornbush – voice. Stuff – God. Noise – message. Not imagination, but attention, recursion, decision. If he does not hear anything, he can move on with the sheep. If he hears an appeal, he must answer. The imposition demands responsibility. The Moses-Complex deals with recognition from decisions, connections, relations, ruptures, [...] the

25 'Deshalb werden nicht Bedeutungen von Klängen oder Bildern untersucht, sondern die Beschaffenheit der Konnektivität von Tönen und Einstellungen. [Darin liegt das Mediale des Moses-Komplexes:] Die zugrundeliegende, aber selbst nicht wahrnehmbare Struktur oder Ordnung möglicher Relationen in Kunstwerken und Praktiken zu heben.'

26 'Die Versuchsanordnung stellt Sehen und Hören im Verhältnis zu Gesetzlichkeit und Gehorsam auf die Probe.'

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logic of signifiers and the constitutive conditions in sound and in cinema.²⁷ (57)

Whereas Moses' initial hesitation, his diffident wish to be left alone and tend his herd, marks an already executed decision (he has heard the calling), his act of differentiating also acknowledges a politics of perceptions, of material discrepancies and impurities, producing 'new effects and affects for new and real relations, human and non-human ones'²⁸ (60): inasmuch as a culture or society is a complex of interacting forces, claims and voices, the minor differential relations between the material and immaterial, noise and message, channel and signal are directed against every fundamentalism of 'wholeness'; their emergence advertises the possibility of coming communities, societies and legalities.²⁹

In the light of this aesthetic and political model of differences, *Sto Lýko* and *Sweetgrass* devise two diverging strategies which, nonetheless, prove to be equally critical and effective in rejecting the comprehensive images of 'realism'. *Sweetgrass* undertakes a fine-tuning of the senses, a sharpening of distinctions; its irritations, the closeness of things, the sound editing, serve as pedagogy of perception which also pertains to the relation of forces between all (human and non-human) gregarious animals. In contrast, *Sto Lýko* presents a blunted image that may induce intensive affects, but imparts them as a wall or physical block of stimuli – the solid clouds and dark rooms providing an emblem of impenetrable politics, the poor reception erasing all differences, the herders forever unable to perceive any remote

27 'Dornbusch – Stimme. Zeug – Gott. Rauschen – Botschaft. Nicht Vorstellung sondern Aufmerksamkeit, Rekursion, Entscheidung. Hört er nichts, kann er mit den Schafen weiterziehen. Hört er da einen Anruf, muss er antworten. Die Zu-mutung provoziert Verantwortung. Der Moses-Komplex handelt vom Erkennen aus Entscheidungen, Beziehungen, Relationen, Rissen, [...] der Logik der Signi-fikanten und den konstitutiven Verhältnissen im Klang und im Kino.'

28 '... neue Effekte und Affekte für neue und wirkliche Beziehungen, menschliche und unmenschliche.'

29 Holl, 'Moses-Komplex', 61.

appeal and condemned, beyond their considering, to tend their flocks in silence. Only with the closing scene – then, however, with the greatest force – does the compact block of the movie shatter at one blow. But this catastrophe yields little more than a single gaping distinction between the visual and audible, between the locations of power and impotent violence. Thus, the affinity and distance between *Sweetgrass* and *Sto Lýko* become manifest in the former's processual calibration of closely interwoven signals and the latter's persistent noise which terminates in a single instance of desperate political discrimination. It is the distance between sensory exercise and shock.

8. THE END (TWO) – It is midmorning, with a faint drizzle from the white late summer sky. In the cab of a moving truck, one can see the farm hand John Ahern – a close shot of his profile in the left foreground – dressed in a felt cowboy hat, red shirt and sheepskin waistcoat, his wrinkled face with a stubbly beard sprinkled with grey. He lights a cigarette with his Zippo, protecting the flame with his cupped hand (the window is partly rolled down), and smokes slowly and thoughtfully throughout the scene. Next to him the driver, a middle-aged man also in a cowboy hat, sits with his right hand resting casually on the steering wheel. Raindrops glisten on the glass of the side window, and behind it a wavy line of hills with dry grass and an occasional clump of trees rolls by. Both men look straight ahead through the bright windscreen; only now and then does the driver turn towards Ahern to ask a brief question ('What are you going to do, John?') and gets an answer of two equally brief sentences separated by a long silence ('I wasn't going to worry about it for a week or two ... about the first of October I'll have a few goats to shear; a few sheep to tag'). Then, all we hear is the sough of the airflow and the tyres on the wet asphalt. More than half a minute after the last words, the film cuts to black; however, the road noise continues while two laconic title cards inform us retrospectively of the film's topic, the last trail of a

band of sheep in Montana in 2003, and the credits start rolling. During this phase, the balance of the stereo sound first seems to shift slightly to the right channel; then, the higher frequencies of the spectrum are slowly faded down so that, after over two minutes, the sough has left the sphere of recognizable sounds and eventually become a deep, chthonic rumble.

On the symbolic level, *Sweetgrass* ends with an image of closure and disintegration: on the one hand, the final scene and text inserts evoke a cultural past without a future, adopting the melancholy stance of ethnographic archiving, of the audiovisual conservation of a vanishing practice.³⁰ On the other hand, returning to the labourer and his exposure to economic circumstances which far exceed his agency seems to abandon the film's elaborately rehearsed politics of the senses and its implications of another heterarchical perception and community. For Megan Ratner, the sequence connotes 'uncertainty and transience', depicting John Ahern as 'just another American between jobs [...]. The final note is one of anxiety, set against a landscape inextricably bound up with power' (2010: 27). However, beyond the symbolic, *Sweetgrass* also qualifies such an interpretation and adheres to its laboriously contrived strategy of medial and perceptual differentiation: the filmmakers themselves felt uneasy with ending on *humans* and a kind of closure that appears both specious and clichéd. 'But, by extending the shot for as long as possible, and thereby minimizing the significance of the already laconic dialogue in it, and then by extending it

30 According to Anna Grimshaw (2011: 249), this documentation of 'a disappearing way of life' not only regards a specific work practice, but even the 'grandeur and dignity of people' who have become a 'symbol of the freedom, individualism, and pioneering spirit of the American West'. For Robert Koehler (2011), the political dimension of 'these representations of working on the surface of the earth is an overwhelming sadness at the process of collapse and the end of things'. Meanwhile, Barbash and Castaing-Taylor are clearly aware of such 'pitfalls of patronizing romanticism and nostalgia' in what they call "salvage ethnography" – how to represent a world on the wane – something that's been considered totally retrograde within anthropology since the 1960s' (MacDonald, 2013: 267).

acoustically for as long again after the hard cut to black' (MacDonald, 2013: 276), the last scene opens up into a pure soundscape that leads back to the sensory and, in the end, undermines social concernment with a disembodied, reverberating drone.

A question persists: is the encompassing realization of sense relations and minimal differences sufficient to motivate an equally egalitarian politics?³¹ With respect to *Sweetgrass*, Robert Koehler claims that 'the moral burden of the political ideas is borne purely by the cinema acts of watching and listening' (2009). And Jacques Rancière advocates an *aesthesia* that disentangles itself of the utopian idyll of 'naturalism' to step aside and take into account the wide array of signs, subjects and matter outside a predetermined ideological perspective. His notion of *atopia* demands a 'displaced' perception (2003: 122), an 'aesthetic and ethical practice of equality [...], of egalitarian foreignness [which] puts into peril everything that is inscribed in the repertoires of society and politics' (123). The atopic gaze becomes a 'labor of attention. [...] The artist's labor is to focus on the labor of this gaze, to construct the point of view of foreignness: the conversion of a body and the voice that accompanies it' (123-124). Both *Sweetgrass* and *Sto Lýko* suggest such a displaced and attentive vision – by taking notice of the sheep, the poor, the thing, by amending the human with a non-human position, prose with poetry, landscape with diagram, noise with absolute hearing, the social with the sensory. Yet this redistribution of the sensible can perhaps be further extended and complicated to convert the acknowledgement of the world into an act of politics which is not only in 'disagreement' with social and aesthetic allocations, but visits the margin where they touch that placeless place which does not belong to the logic of

31 It has been remarked that Rancière might identify egalitarian aesthetics too readily with non-hierarchical politics, that his merging of an *equality* of the perceived with the *equality* of political subjects arises from a vague and arbitrary homonymy (Klammer, 'Jacques Rancière', 207-208).

representation. It could infinitely approximate this limit of the sensible and, thus, refer to that which (even in cinema) remains excluded. Certainly, this fundamentally political threshold, the potential point of contact between the field of experience and ‘the part of those who have no part’ (Rancière 1999: 30), can only be presaged – for instance by demarcating the killing of sheep as an unreadable event. It does not comply with the sensorium or rationality of a collective; it takes place on the other side, at dawn, in an undifferentiated, dimly lit landscape of sallow hills and electrical pylons.

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