

**Procedural residues after the shooting of *The  
Ballad of Oppenheimer Park.***

**by**

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## Abstract

Documentary practices are embedded in the idea of the representation of reality. This paradigm reinforces the authority of the State and neutralizes the political agency of the people being filmed. What happen if, instead of *representing*, we assume that a documentary film is *presenting* a reality?

After a year in conversation with Indigenous people who spend the day drinking in Oppenheimer Park, in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, I proposed to them employing the framework of the Hollywood Western to make a collaborative film. By introducing the iconic elements of the Western in the form of props, I spent fifteen weeks in the park documenting a series of performances enacted by people who've been fighting the imposition of law and order since being ordered onto reservations.

The result is 130 hours of problematic footage that raises questions about colonization, political agency, contemporary forms of control, ethics, and historiography.

**Keywords:** Collaborative documentary film; Expanded western; Oppenheimer Park; Downtown Eastside; Political cinema; Colonization; Urban reservation system.

## **Dedication**

To those who spend the day drinking in the Oppenheimer Park.

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# Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Partial Copyright Licence .....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Dedication .....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii

<b>Chapter 1. Artist’s Statement: Procedural residues after the shooting of <i>The Ballad of Oppenheimer Park</i> .....</b>	<b>1</b>
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<b>References .....</b>	<b>9</b>
Appendix A. Beyond representation: documentary practices and the sonic relation with the real .....	11
Overture .....	11
First Movement: the dilemma of representation.....	13
Second Movement: the virtual.....	14
Third Movement: the multiplicity.....	16
Fourth Movement: sound .....	18
Fifth Movement: the sonic approach in documentary practices, Pierre Perrault and <i>Pour la suite du monde</i> .....	20
Appendix B. Procedural residues after the shooting of <i>The Ballad of Oppenheimer Park</i> .....	24

## **Chapter 1. Artist's Statement:**

### **Procedural residues after the shooting of *The Ballad of Oppenheimer Park***

Very soon after moving to Vancouver in 2011 to begin my studies toward a Master in Fine Arts degree, I became interested in the Oppenheimer Park, one of the most emblematic public spaces in the core of the infamous neighbourhood known as the Downtown Eastside. Until very recently, the park was a territory controlled by Latino gangs and I wanted to develop a film project with retired Central American drug dealers. My first documentary film "La Frontera Inifnita", made in 2008, follows the Central American diaspora going trough Mexico in its way to the promise land of the North.

This relatively small park, run by the City of Vancouver, serves as the public space for the residents of the area who live in single room occupancies in many of the former hotels that surround the park that are now owned by the State. By providing social housing, the State is able to inhibit homelessness and "keep track" of the low-income residents who live on the welfare cheque.

From the beginning of 2012, I became a regular fixture inside the perimeter of the park, as I was able to reciprocate the dynamic of the gift exchange that rules the economy there. Alcohol, tobacco and technical expertise are the three main currencies or gifts that people normally exchange.

While gifting and counter-gifting with intoxicants, Native nicotine and tips for filming cats or advice for running from the police, I began to get personally involved with a group of people who became interested in the idea of having a filmmaker around. Very soon I abandoned my original idea as I came to realize that there was a reason why the Central American drug dealers were not in the park anymore. First Nation, or Indigenous, drug dealers had taken their place.



The condition of having lost my original idea and ending up not knowing what kind of film I would make allowed me to open the project up to the infinite possibilities that began to unfold during the next steps of the process. I embraced the idea that this process would eventually reveal a new cinematic potential, even if we started from zero.

\*

As creations of the nineteenth century colonization of the North West coast of North America, Vancouver and the province of British Columbia are products of the colonizing narratives associated with the conquest of the West. The exodus of pioneers looking for God's Country, the confinement of the Indigenous population on Reserves, the imposition of the law and order to enforce a capitalist economy, and the incursion of missionaries with their new morality and disciplinary fervour are some of the narratives that continue to be present in the history and also in the everyday life in western Canada.

If we add to these colonizing narratives the fact that Vancouver is a terminal city (the railroads across Canada end here), famous for being a party town, and that British Columbia has been shaped by an ongoing boom or bust economy, beginning with a gold rush in the 1860s, it is easy to find a correlation between these historical narratives and the idea of the West in popular culture whose most magnificent productions are the classical Western films made in Hollywood.

Vancouver is full of outlaws who go from Saloon to Saloon, singing Johnny Cash at the karaoke bar and flirting with virtuous prostitutes. But more than simply reducing these historical narratives into a single romanticized figure, I began to realize that the social dynamic in the Oppenheimer Park neighbourhood resembles two of the conflicts that govern many of the classic Western films, especially those of John Ford. Rather than the traditional misconception of Cowboys versus Indians, since these two sets of outlaws commonly act in solidarity, I am referring to the conflicts between the State and the Indians, specifically the infamous establishment of the reservation system and the prohibition of alcohol.

The first legal prohibition in the newborn Colony of British Columbia, created in the 1858, was stated in the *Proclamation respecting sale or gift of Intoxicating liquor to Indians* signed by James Douglas, first Governor of the Colony and a high ranking officer of the Hudson's Bay Company. It was his hope that the establishment of the Indian Reserve, would "result in the moral elevation of the native Indian races, in rescuing them from degradation, and protecting them from oppression and rapid decay."<sup>1</sup>

Today, most of the people who spend the day in the Oppenheimer Park who call themselves Indians are living *off reserve*, and they continue to defy the restrictive policy against buying and consuming alcohol by drinking openly all day, from Whisky to Beer to 50% rubbing alcohol or antiseptic mouthwash like Listerine.

\*

In the early stages of this project, I established a weekly film program devoted to screening controversial documentary and fiction films in order to raise questions around conventional documentary practices. This was performed at the park's field house, which serves as a multipurpose room and headquarters for the City of Vancouver staff.

I also wanted to share films that would reveal my particular influences as a filmmaker, such as Edward Curtis' *In the Land of the War Canoes* filmed in 1913 with Kwakwaka'wakw actors/participants, or Allan King's *Skidrow* filmed in 1956 very close to the park and following the everyday lives of three alcoholic derelicts, or Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles* that follows a group of Native Americans in Los Angeles, transplants from Southwest reservations, as they flirt, drink, party, fight, and dance.

The purpose of the film program was also to question the representational stereotypes imposed on the people who live in the neighbourhood by an army of goodwill documentary enthusiasts, outreach workers and leftist journalists, who are constantly producing new documentary content for the so called "community."

<sup>1</sup> British Columbia, *Papers relative to the affairs of British Columbia. Part II. Copies of Despatches from the Governor of British Columbia to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and from the Secretary of State to the Governor, relative to the Government of the Colony*, 68, [https://archive.org/details/cihm\\_29849](https://archive.org/details/cihm_29849)

These good intentions tend to create a new set of stereotypes, such as the good junkie, the good Indian, the good prostitute, deprived of all subversive agency, who are in the process of being integrated into society by the grace of detoxification, rehabilitation, reconciliation, or, maybe one ought to say, civilization. In this situation, the subversive force of the “documentary subject” is buried under a blanket of moral redemption.

Very early in the process of developing the film, I began to realize that the word “documentary” raised a lot of suspicion, mostly with the people who drink heavily. Having appeared in at least one documentary (there are people who have participated in many more), everyone I met in the park referred to disappointing experiences that went from not being paid, to generating an intense trauma. Rosa Matilpi, my first love in the park, told me, and I’m quoting by memory: “The last time I appeared in a documentary a wound opened, and since then I started drinking again. You better not make a documentary.”

But my problem was that I don’t know how to make fiction films, and I was not interested in producing one. Despite the fact of its being a problematic practice, and maybe because of that, I also believe in the potential expansion of documentary as a cinematographic form.

As I see it, cinema is the art of time and memory—not as a *representation* of time and memory, but as a *presentation* of time and memory. Cinema opens a space that allows the memory not to be seen as an image, for example, but experienced as the returning and continuing process of becoming.

Looking over my past films, I have come to realize the close resemblance between the poetics of the documentary and the poetics of the epic. And here I need to be very clear that I’m not referring to epic as an institutional text that narrates the legendary battles of a hero. Instead, I understand the epic as a literary form that carries the potential of bringing into the present what is deeply buried within memory and history.

To use Walter Benjamin's terms, the epic makes room for the return of the memory of the oppressed so that this memory can finally be redeemed.

In his essay "*Aîtres de la langue et demeures de la pensée*" (this could be translated as "The atriums of language and the abodes of thought"), Henri Maldiney, the solitary French phenomenologist who confronted Heidegger and Lacan, writes:

The *epic* brings to light the latent, the concealed, what is buried in the unconscious of the people under some kind of dark pre-language full of incomprehensible names and gestures, unexplainable epithets, magical confines, signs deprived of sense.<sup>2</sup>

The epic also makes possible the return of what is concealed under layers of history. It opens a threshold for the burning recognition of the past within the present, so that the unredeemed forces of the past activate a rupture in the time of the now.

But what is the history of people who are constantly rejected from history? What returns from between the lines of an imperial history built as a triumphant and chronological procession?

As the political anthropologist Pierre Clastres suggests, "the history of peoples without history is the history of their struggle against the State."<sup>3</sup>

And here is where I come back to the Western. Commonly considered the most racist and supremacist of all genres, the Western is in fact the only genre in which the State is weak since it hasn't achieved a monopoly over violence and private property is just being established. The canonical Western, with the Cowboy or the Cavalry as the hero, is in fact a tale of openly violent forces that remain out of the control of the incipient State. The tale of the imposition of law and order acknowledges the superior and violent force of the ones who defy that imposition, the outlaws.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Maldiney, *Aîtres de la langue et demeures de la pensée* (Lausana: L'Age d'Homme, 1975) quoted in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Cuando las imágenes toman posición* (Madrid: Machado libros, 2008), 217.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology* (New York: Zone Books, 1987), 218.

Likewise, if there is a common denominator in the Park, is the condition of the outlaw, the one who keeps defying the imposition of law and order, no matter if it is the cavalry, the police, or the outreach worker.

So, I proposed the possibility of creating a contemporary Western film using a documentary approach and using the Park as the set. More than simply reversing the point of view in order to create an anti-Western from the perspective of the “Indians,” the idea was to use the framework of the Western as a genre, with its iconic elements and narrative devices, and to introduce it into the everyday life of people who identify as “Indians,” who live in a highly controlled zone that mimics the Indian Reserve, and who drink themselves to death.

This defiance into death is not only a nihilistic gesture but a highly symbolic act that has historical roots and that reaffirms their insubordination against a political system whose forms of control are based in the conservation of life and the body of the individual. I’m referring to Vancouver’s unique system of drug and alcohol harm-reduction that exists hand-in-hand with the integrated network of social services such as subsidized housing, community court, and welfare cheques.

By dissecting John Ford’s epic westerns (specifically *Fort Apache* and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*) and listing all their iconic and narrative elements, I wrote an outline removing the action in order to create an open text that worked as a zone of indistinction where we don’t know if the Cavalry has attacked or are planning to attack the Indian camp, where we don’t know if a dancing ceremony is a celebration of a victory or a preparation for a coming war.

Instead of an anti-*Western*, the idea was to collaborate in making an expanded *Western*. More than considering this new Western as a continuation of the triumphant linear temporality that began when the West was won, I considered that history as a multiplicity of continuous disruptions that happen in the time of the now. The social dynamic at the park isn’t simply a historical production; on the contrary, it keeps producing the historical.

The Indigenous burial ground that Oppenheimer Park is considered to be is also the place where legendary battles keep reappearing, like Little Big Horn, where yellow-haired Custer was defeated, or the Massacre of Wounded Knee, where hundreds of Sioux Native Americans were killed. But the Park is also the place where Kwakwaka'wakw headhunters return in their canoes with their war trophies, or the Mohawk once more raise their weapons against the Royal Regiment.

By recognizing their resemblance to the figure of the outlaw and their struggles with the conflicts of the Western, the people of the Park agreed, in a very playful way, to participate in the production of a new Western. What we needed to do was to open a space and a time to cannibalize this epic iconography in order to bring to the present what lies in the memory of the people. And this was not meant for the representation of a memory, *but for the presentation of the memory*. We were not making a film that represents a reality; instead we were making a film that produces a new reality that keeps happening.

To be clear, if I keep using words as “our” or “we,” is not because I want to give the impression of some sort of democratic dynamic or consensus during the creation of the film. I assume the responsibility of what has been done. But I do acknowledge the highly collaborative nature of this project.

By introducing western props, from the cards to the cavalry flag to the covered wagon, and with the awareness that we were making a Western, not a documentary, we spent fifteen weeks during the summer of 2013 in the Park with a camera and a microphone documenting a series of celebratory rituals performed by the descendants of First Nation people who have been resisting against all forms of confinement and control since they were placed in reservations.

\*

Each of the 130 hours of footage that were produced is responding to a specific moment in the classical narrative of the western. For the final editing process (it hasn't concluded yet), I'm proposing to create a series of sequences in the form of tableaux, or vignettes, according to their resemblance to the different iconic moments of the classical

Western narrative. Each sequence will be introduced by an inter-title that will make direct reference to the moment it is occupying in the narrative, providing a prelude or introduction to the iconic source.

This introduction, apart from opening a space for juxtaposing historical, political, aesthetical or cultural references, will allow me to edit each sequence without following a conventional narrative based on the progressive development of a character, for there will be a meta-narrative already in play. The people who appear in the film will not be at the service of the storytelling because the text in the inter-titles will have already established a narrative.

In “Procedural residues after the shooting of *The Ballad of Oppenheimer Park*,” I have wanted to show the process of putting together three sequences after a general review of the footage. I have edited together quite different sequences that I hope will give an idea of the dissimilar techniques employed in the shooting. A listener/viewer will encounter the people who are constantly reappearing in the footage, the nature of the relationship between the people and the filmmaker, our political and aesthetic concerns, and the result of introducing the Western framework and iconic elements.

The editing will continue by creating many other sequences until a sufficient corpus is made. Playing with Walter Benjamin’s concept of constellations—the process of re-arranging phenomena in order to keep producing an always-changing absolute idea by the nature of this re-montage—the last part of the editing process will consist of a playful process of re-positioning the sequences until a feature “documentary” crystallizes.

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## Appendix A.

### Beyond representation: documentary practices and the sonic relation with the real

“Before starting out on my thirty years of studies in Zen I saw mountains as mountains and water as water. As my understanding gradually deepened I reached the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and water is not water. But now that I have grasped the real essence of Zen I have found peace, for now I see mountains as mountains again, and water as water.”

**Ch’ing-yüan Wei-hsin (Seigen Ishin)**

#### Overture

The film plane is, in essence, a multiplicity of contradictions<sup>4</sup>. It is image without being an image. It is representation without being representation. It moves towards reality while at the same time moves away from reality. It reaffirms itself as a medium at the time it dissolves as a medium. It communicates without communicating anything. It unveils hiding. It moves without moving. Endures while vanishing. The film plane is, not being so.

The plane is the surface in between the genesis and the phenomena. In this respect, the plane remains as the place where an infinite number of variations of the sounded and the silence, the visible and the invisible, the knowable and the unknowable, the perceptible and the imperceptible manifest and conceal.

Approaching the film plane as a “medium” is half right. Indeed, the plane establishes itself as an intermediary between what is not separated: the individual and the real. The medium reaffirms us as the world's privileged individuals (subjects) who determine the modulation of the relationships between ourselves and the other individuals (objects).

<sup>4</sup> I'm using here “film plane” instead of “film image” or “film shot.” These two terms are not as accurate as “film plane” to refer to the surface and the surrounding space during the actual manifestation of the film.

Is half right because the plane at the same time operates as a transparency. The plane moves also towards its disappearance as a medium as it reveals the non-separation between subjects and objects, the intricate coalescence, the non-differentiation of what does not exist separately. The plane is the opacity at the same time it is the transparency. It is the representation at the same time it is the presentation.

If the film plane is the place of the manifestation and the concealment of an infinite number of variations, it is complex, and some time useless, categorizing cinema practices. But film history needs to neutralize the contradictions in order to assume that the plane is one thing or the other, never both at the same time. The categories are necessary.

One of the major concerns of film history is with the contradictions that are in relation with *the real*. Film history should make very clear the position and the relationship that each practice has with the real in order to continue insisting on the first major classification that divides practices that are directly related to the real (documentary) from practices that are indirectly related with the real (fiction). Although the criterion is inaccurate, the real sets the axis from which cinematographic practices gravitate.

Once the first major classification operates defining if it is directly or indirectly related with the real, the process continues with the expanded questions that starts arising: Is the plane the real or the appearance? Is the real visible or invisible? Is the real created or is it the creative genesis? Is the real the phenomena or something beyond the phenomena? Is the real the ultimate end or it is the pure means? Is the representation the phenomenon or it is only a representation? Does the real exist, or does it not exist yet? And so on.

The answers align in order to define each film practice through convincing affirmations. Regarding to cinema practices that are directly related with the real, or what it is known as documentary film practices, perhaps the greatest affirmation that neutralizes and norm the multiplicity of contradictions that coexist in its core, is the one that establishes that *the documentary film plane is a legitimate representation of the real*.

The purpose of this paper is to question this statement arguing that the representational relationship, that has been ruling documentary film practices since the very beginning, reduces the real to an object constructed *a posteriori* and conditioned by the subject through a scopic, hierarchical and unidirectional relationship.

In this respect I'm proposing an approach to the real using the concepts of the *virtual* and the *multiplicity* present in the radical empiricist philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, and using as well the sonic nature of cinema. This approach finds similitude in the work of some documentary filmmakers and musicians moving against the grain in history, and it allows us to expand the possibilities of documentary practices by opening the real beyond the limits imposed by the representation and the subject.

### **First Movement: the dilemma of representation**

The notion of the real that we currently have necessarily involves a visual index and a degree of resemblance: the real as what can be "proved" visually and that retains a resemblance of its reproductions. The existence or reality of things is subjected to these same conditions. What doesn't manifest visually, directly or indirectly, does not exist. We need evidence, and the film plane has become a legitimate proof of the real since it is its most faithful representation.

This particular notion of the real establishes a relationship that limits the real only to what can be proved visually. In this sense the vision is imposed over the other senses in terms of authority and without it any other sensory relation is illegitimate. The real is limited to what the plane represents.

We are representational beings. We need language to refer to the things. We need memory to refer to the past. We need thoughts to refer to the ideas. We need concepts to refer to the abstract. We need parts to refer to the whole. The way we relate with the world and with the ideas necessarily goes through representation.

This representational relationship is deeply rooted in western philosophy. It is not the case here to offer an extensive historical analysis, but we can see how the division between the physical world of sensible appearances (phenomena) and the metaphysical

world of perfect ideas (noumena) made by Plato established the grounds for the representational dynamic having the real in the middle. We can see clearly a progressive line along the history of western philosophy by a constant reformulation of this division (Kant, Schopenhauer, Deleuze).

When the moving image made its appearance, philosophy realizes that never had such a sophisticated representational toy that at the same time is a form of valid evidence, scientific and legally. The old dichotomies and the old problems claim for a re-reading under this new light. Cinema became the ground where the old problems of philosophy are reframed again.

Deleuze reveals this in his cinema books, *The Movement-Image* and *The Time-Image*, but his intention is not just to continue the tradition. On the contrary he is trying to subvert it. At the time he is using the image to refer to the old philosophical problems, his approach to the cinema-Image is not representational at all.

I am not an iconoclast, nor am I pretending here to deny the value of the representational forms of knowledge. In the same spirit as Deleuze, the only intention is to argue that the real transcends the limits of visibility and representation. But this doesn't mean that I'm trying to grant the status of the real to the metaphysical. My approach is in line with the radical empiricism of Deleuze and, in this respect, denies any possible metaphysical.

## **Second Movement: the virtual**

Using the pair virtual/actual, Deleuze argues the existence of phenomena. Every perceptible phenomenon is a manifestation (actualization) of a virtual infinity where lies the genetic condition that generates it. Although the virtual is not perceptible, and the perceptible consist of actualizations, denying the existence of the virtual is to deny the existence of the actualizations as phenomena. The virtual does not exist separate from the actual, as the actual does not exist separate from the virtual. Both are absolutely real. There is only a difference in degree (intensity), and not of nature, between the virtual and the actual.

This does not mean that the actual is the visible face of the invisible virtual, or that the actualizations are copies of the virtual. Alain Badiou suggests that: "the virtual is actualized in the entity as an immanent potency and eludes all resemblance to their actualizations."<sup>5</sup> The actual is not the representation of the virtual; it is the actual. And the same vice versa.

Deleuze brings forward the concept of *virtual* to separate his philosophy from the forms of thought that distinguish between phenomena and *the possible* that prefigure them and which establish a representational relationship. For example, Plato's division between the phenomena and the noumena (*the possible*). In this case the phenomena are merely representations of perfect ideas, creating a difference of nature between the two and a hierarchy. As Deleuze writes, "The possible is conceived as the image of the real, and the real as the resemblance of the possible."<sup>6</sup> The possible, other name for the noumenon or the metaphysical, stands as the origin where the phenomenal representations arises, even it was created *a posteriori*.

"The possible is opposed to the real and so compromises the thought in the erroneous and the analogy. The virtual is instead absolutely real. [...] (Think the actual as the actualization of the virtual, think the virtual as the production process of the actual). [...] the virtual opposes (formally) to the actual, but both are real. The first as a dynamic instance of the One, the second as simulacra. [...] the real unfolds itself as a imbroglia of linked virtualities."<sup>7</sup>

In terms of the documentary film practices, *the possible* establishes a hierarchy in which the film plane stands as a partial reproduction of an image elaborated after the plane but that at the same time claims to be the origin from which the plane is created. The film plane turns out to be the reproduction of a concept "made retroactively similar to the image which it reassembles"<sup>8</sup>. The real become the non-existent referent created from its reproductions.

<sup>5</sup> Alain Badiou, *Deleuze "El clamor del Ser"*, trans. Dardo Scavino (Buenos Aires: Manantial, 2002), 72. [the translation is mine.]

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Badiou, *Deleuze*, 72.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 72.

The real, according to Deleuze, is illimitable, indivisible, is independent of the perception of the subject, moves, transforms and lasts in time. The plane, in this respect, became a boundary between the actual and the virtual, containing both simultaneously at the same time it contains its emptiness. Both manifest as presence and as emptiness without any of both preceding the other. There is no hierarchy. The plane, according to Deleuze, is not a representation of the real, is the presentation of the real.

### **Third Movement: the multiplicity**

To approach this "imbroglio of virtualities", as defined by Badiou, it is necessary to invoke another key concept in the work of Deleuze: multiplicity.

The virtual is not a set of self-sufficient substances, nor an individuated whole. The virtual is a matrix that fluctuates with respect to the relations of the elements that conforms it. Although it is internally differentiated, the elements are indivisible. Deleuze uses the term "multiplicity" (which he takes from Bergson) to refer to this matrix:

"the elements of the multiplicity [are] inseparable from a potential or a virtuality. In this sense they imply no prior identity, no positing of a something that could be called one or the same. On the contrary, their indetermination renders possible the manifestation of difference freed from all subordination."<sup>9</sup>

Michel Serres, perhaps the contemporary philosopher most concerned with multiplicity, defines it as something that "it is not individuated; globally, it is not summed up. So it's neither a flock, nor a school, nor a heap, nor a swarm, nor a herd, nor a pack. It is not an aggregate; it is not discrete. It's a bit viscous perhaps. A lake under the mist, the sea, a white plain, background noise, the murmur of a crowd, time."<sup>10</sup>

It is critical to understand that the multiplicity, the matrix of the virtual, is not a theoretical abstraction or an "epistemological monster" as Serres tells us. On the contrary the multiplicity is "the ordinary lot of situations, including that of the ordinary

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 183.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Genevieve James and James Nielson (The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 4.

scholar, regular knowledge, everyday work, in short, our common object. [...] We recognize it everywhere, yet reason still insists on ignoring it.”<sup>11</sup>

If multiplicity is the matrix that Deleuze uses to ground the virtual, so we can approach the real as a multiplicity. In this respect the multiplicity, as a matrix of relationships, allows us to transcend the idea of the real as a set of visible self-sufficient substances. In terms of documentary film practices, multiplicity allows us to transcend the idea of the real as a set of extraordinary apparitions.

Not being a unified whole -on the contrary an open whole- in the multiplicity the parts do not refer to the whole. That is to say, the part does not represent the whole. The relationship that is established between the part and the multiplicity depends on the rest of the relationships. No representative relationship is possible. If we consider the film plane as a part of the multiplicity then the plane is not the representation of the real, it is the real.

The multiplicity as a set of relations demolishes the notion of the subject. Which doesn't mean that the individuals are annihilated. However, these individuals do not enter into hierarchical relationships, and does not precede the multiplicity (neither is it the other way around). The individual withdraws from the notion of the subject towards the openness of the multiplicity, towards the space where the multiplicity, which is at the same time the individual, is presented as it is.

Surely the reader already noticed a very complex dilemma. The documentary film practices, unlike non-documentary film practices, have as their specificity the relationship with the real based in resemblance. Documentary practices can be read today as the front line of a long tradition of avant-garde movements trying to bring art to life.

But the difference here is that we are not trying to deny that the documentary film plane resembles the perceptible phenomena of the world, and in this sense could be seen as a representation of the world.

<sup>11</sup> Serres, *Genesis*, 5.



The proposal here is that, even there is a representational inertia, the documentary and the real are not representing each other. Creating a representational bond limits and reduces both. Documentary has the possibility of presenting the real, not as a way of replacing the real with another real, but to realize that we are not separated from the real that is already there.

#### **Fourth Movement: sound**

The real as multiplicity requires an approach closer than the conceptual, rational, visual and representational, without incurring in the annihilation of these tools. The real as multiplicity requires a non-mediated approach, and in this sense sound is offered as a more generous *act* to come closer to it. Serres, throughout his book *Genesis*, approaches multiplicity by using sounds as the paradigmatic examples (*background noise* is his favorite) and proposes listening as the only way of relating, perceiving and knowing multiplicity:

“Hearing is a model of understanding. It is still active and deep when our gaze has gone hazy or gone to sleep. It is continuous while the other senses are intermittent. I hear and I understand, blindly, when evidence has vanished and intuition has faded out [...] The multiple had been thought, perhaps, but it hadn't been sounded.”<sup>12</sup>

This approach not only displaces the visual axis in relation to the real, it also displaces the notion of axis. Sound can break the representational siege and link the other senses through a direct relationship with the real that is already there surrounding it all.

“A flight of screaming birds, a school of herring tearing through the water like a silken sheet, a cloud of chirping crickets, a booming whirlwind of mosquitos ... crowds, packs, hordes on the move, and filling with their clamor, space”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 2.

In the film *Le Gai Savoir*, Jean-Luc Godard tells us: "The eye should listen before it looks." While the statement has a clear political reading, would it be accurate to take it literally as an aesthetic statement? Is there any difference?

Documentary film practices usually subordinates sound to the hegemony of the visual. If the visual is worshipped as evidence, sound exists to supplement the verisimilitude of this evidence. And this goes back to the origins of the "talkies." Sound was introduced to the movies with a clear purpose: to strengthen the similarity between reality and its representation. Not just the visual and temporal mimesis, but also the sonic mimesis.

But soon film sound demonstrated that not only was able to supplement verisimilitude but also to produce a non-mediated perception, a real sensation independently from the visual.

Michel Chion, who has studied film sound in detail<sup>14</sup>, distinguishes between two modes of listening: causal and reduced. In the causal we perceive sound as a result of the cause that originates it. The sound becomes the evidence of the source that produces it and merely discloses information of that source. Different from it is the reduced listening in which the sound stops referring to the source which originates it and manifests itself in a completely disembodied way as it begins to reveal its own properties as sensations. Sound creates a direct link with the real, not because it resembles the phenomenal world, but because is a phenomenon of the world inseparable from the rest of the phenomena of which we already are.

"Reduced is meant in the phenomenological sense that Husserl gave to the term. Phenomenal reduction suspends our immediate natural attitude to the World and direct us 'to the things themselves.'"<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-vision: sound on screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Crocker, "Sounds Complicated: What Sixties Audio Experiments Can Teach Us about New Media Environments," in *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema*, ed. James Marchessault and Susan Lord, 65 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007)

Sound is pure manifestation until it is linked to the source that produces it. When a disembodied sound is introduced in the film plane, we tend to assign a body within the plane even when there is no sync. But the incorporation will always be arbitrary and limited to what the plane shows and hides. The disembodied sound, while trying to find a body, is more likely to find it in the body of the listener. Sound does not operate as evidence of the world, but as a pure sensation.

### **Fifth Movement: the sonic approach in documentary practices, Pierre Perrault and *Pour la suite du monde***

Approaching the real through the concepts of virtual and multiplicity neither negates the visual nor subject it to sound. The approach is not new and can be found within a tradition of documentary practices that aspire to transcend the representational bond moving towards the presentation of the real, understanding the real as an absolute that is already there in the world.

A tradition of radical empiricism that searches for the manifestation of the real as the place and the time where there is no separation between subject and object, and the real regains its original unity. A tradition of transparency in which the plane descends towards its own annihilation, not because it becomes the sign or the cipher of the real, but because it is real at the time it survives in the impossibility of being the real: the plane.

The tension occurs not because of similarity, similarity does not operate here. The tension occurs since the plane contains what is uncontainable by nature. In this luminous paradox, the perceiver interpenetrates with the real to the point he no longer exist as a subject and becomes the real itself. Not the plane, nor the subject, nor the real as a referent. Just the real.

This tradition to which I'm referring directs the spectator to the world of phenomena embracing the same contradiction: the real is not just the sound and the silence, the phenomenon and the emptiness, the visible and the invisible, the real hides in between both.

This tradition has a deep link with poetry and stands the same paradox. “The first paradox of the mystic”, writes Jose Angel Valente referring to the poets of the different mystical traditions, “is to situate himself in the language, to indicate with the language and from the language an experience that the language cannot contain.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1963, the poet Pierre Perrault who had been working in radio documentaries fascinated by the rhythm and the sound of the spoken word of his homeland, returns to l'Île-aux-Coudres in the St. Lawrence river in Quebec to make a film with the cameramen Michel Brault and Bernard Gosselin. The film, based in Perrault radio series *Au pays de Neufve-France*, is *Pour la suite du monde*, “a crucial film in cinéma vertite” as Jerry White write, “notable both for the degree to which Perrault was able to forge a new sort of relationship between subject and filmmaker, and for the degree to which it took advantage of then-emergent technologies of portable synch-sound gear.”<sup>17</sup>

“I came to the cinema via the tape recorder” said Perrault to Peter Wintonick in the documentary film *Cinéma Vérité: Defining the Moment*<sup>18</sup>. And we can perceive that in his films. *Pour la suite du monde* is constructed as a layering of rivers that are constantly flowing. Rivers of words, sounds and silences that encompass the reality and the desire, the fact and the memory. The multi-directional stream of time where the islanders perform a “long-dormant” whale hunt in order to bring back the ritual that would allow the continuity of the world.

By doing this, Perrault is not trying to create a link by resemblance with the real, either visual or sonorous. He is just trying to present the real as it manifests to him. But not in the naivety of believing that is enough to show the real as it appears. On the contrary, addressing the real as a profound experience that transcends the visible and the representations, and that needs to be approached, primarily, through the recorded sound.

<sup>16</sup> José Ángel Valente, “Ensayo sobre Miguel de Molinos,” in *Variaciones sobre el pájaro y la red*, 203 (Barcelona: TusQuets, 1991). [the translation is mine]

<sup>17</sup> Jerry White, *The radio eye: cinema in the North Atlantic, 1958-1998* (Waterloo: Wilfried Laurier University Press, 2009), 34.

<sup>18</sup> *Cinéma Vérité: Defining the Moment*, DVD, directed by Peter Wintonick (Toronto: National Film Board of Canada, 1999)

“[...] I may have started a way of listening that gives as much importance to the story itself as to the language used to tell it. Because of Yolande in the first place, and then because of the people of the region, and finally because of the tape recorder, which allowed me to check things, experience them more deeply and appreciate the language”<sup>19</sup>

By approaching the universe of the islanders primarily through sound and with no representational obligations, Perrault dissolves the notion of the filmmaker as a subject separated from the real by realizing that he is already there in the pulse of what he is listening. Perrault remains as a listener that quietly allows the real to manifest. That quietly opens the space to allow the real (and he as a part of it) to be presented as it is: the pure sensation in between the word and the speechlessness, the sound and the silence, the memory and the oblivion, the visible and the invisible.

Understanding the real as a multiplicity of sonorous streams instead of a set of extraordinary apparitions, allow him to displace any hierarchical relationship between the individuals of the real creating a momentary indetermination that subverts the possibility of subordination. The relation stops being unidirectional. The project of Perrault is not just aesthetical, is ethical as well.

“Perrault’s films, though, invoke this ethical quandary of how close a filmmaker can get to a subject by the way that he tries to fold himself fully into the life of whatever he is filming. His films uses vérité’s emphasis on spontaneity to centralize spoken language and its importance to the daily life of communities, rather than centralizing viscerally powerful images that often seem calculated to generate an emotional, even simplistic reaction.”<sup>20</sup>

As I mentioned in the beginning of this text, Pierre Perrault in one of documentary filmmakers and musicians that had been approaching the real through sound and understanding it beyond the representational limitations<sup>21</sup>. As it can be perceived, the possibilities of this approach are vast and remain still under explored.

<sup>19</sup> White, *The Radio eye*, 35.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 36

<sup>21</sup> Another remarkable example is Glenn Gould and his “contrapuntal radio documentaries” like *The Idea of North*.

Paraphrasing Michel Serres we can say that *maybe the real had been represented, perhaps, but it hadn't been sounded.*

## **Appendix B.**

### **Procedural residues after the shooting of *The Ballad of Oppenheimer Park***

**Creator/Director:**

Juan Manuel Sepúlveda Martínez

**Description:**

The Ballad of Oppenheimer Park is a playful documentary re-appropriation of the classical Western genre performed by the descendants of the First Nations people of the Canadian West, who have been historically defying the imposition of the law and the order since they were first confined in reservations.

**Filename:**

procedural\_residues\_SFU\_libraries.mp4