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**Ethnography and experimental non-fiction storytelling: relating
the experiences of Maltese Fishermen**

Calleja, G.

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Ethnography and experimental non-fiction storytelling:
relating the experiences of Maltese Fishermen.

Gilbert Calleja

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Abstract

In this practice-based exploration I look at the dynamics of long-term ethnographic research to address the tensions between lived experience and conventional narrative constructs of Mediterranean identities. This research also fills a void in the anthropology of fishermen in Malta which as an area of academic investigation has remained understudied. Speculating on relational meaning making processes and multidimensional and experimental qualities inherent to ethnographic research, I produced non-linear multimodal documentary works as environments with the capacity to engender tangible, immersive and tacit knowledge about situated identities.

Using my seven-year engagement with a family of fishermen from Marsaxlokk, a small fishing port in the south eastern part of Malta, I

reflect on how situated learning experiences can inform experimental non-fiction audio-visual storytelling.

In my research I draw on theories of affect and notions of the archival to reflect on the ways Mediterranean identities are constructed. Examining the ecology of relations that binds together the people and the environment that they inhabit I engage with current discourses on multisensory ethnography, documentary making and narrative power to explore my practice (including two photographic essays, a sound installation, two gallery video projections and a web-based documentary prototype) as a process of creative mediation between the fishermen's world and the public. Using select examples from my fieldwork recordings I show how embodied audio-visual practices enable non-fiction storytellers to re-propose the conditions of the ethnographic encounter.

I look at how, responding to the very particular environmental and socio-cultural conditions of my field of study, I took my practice beyond the canons of traditional documentary photography towards an expanded multimedia form of storytelling. More specifically, I refer to my experiences with people working on and around the Joan of Arc (the family boat), as well as my apprenticeship as a deckhand/fisherman, to examine notions of emplaced learning, collaborative meaning making processes and affective strategies for the development of creative sensory-rich immersive storytelling strategies that provide a more nuanced understanding of Mediterranean identities.

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“Investing in human capital to create more opportunities and promote the well-being of society”.



European Union – European Structural and Investment Funds
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*“Investing in human capital to create more opportunities
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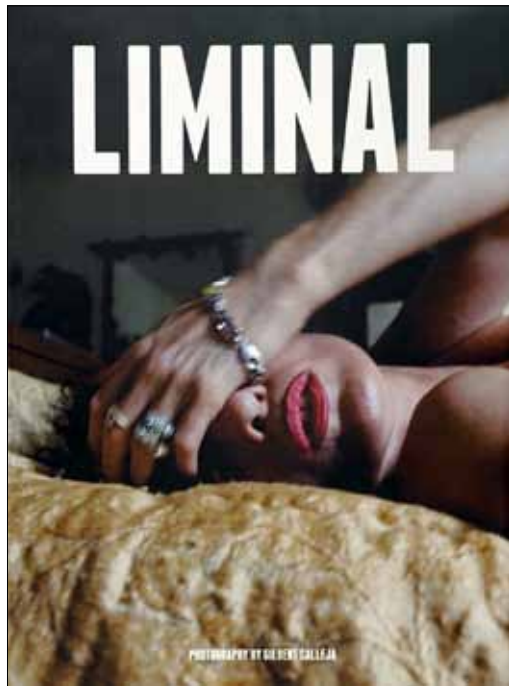


Author's declaration:

I confirm that all the material in this thesis is my own.

INTRODUCTION

In this practice-based project I explore the notion of identity as a complex narrative construct. My work started seven years ago by joining a Maltese fishing boat and this long-standing relationship has awarded me with an intimate knowledge of the fishermen and their relationship with the sea, the boat and the environment in which they live. In this thesis I relate how my experience as a situated learner radically changed my photographic storytelling practice and led me to experiment with audiovisual narrative forms that better reflect the nuances and diversity of lived experience.



In the beginning of 2014 I had just finished working on a multidisciplinary project called *MILKSHAKE*. The project brought together artists and academics to collectively challenge heteronormative narratives and provoke debate on the representation of sexuality, gender performativity and fluid identities. The conception and realisation of the project lasted five years, during which period I concurrently worked on *Liminal*, an extensive photographic documentary of Malta's transgender community. Gaining access to the lives of the persons I was photographing was difficult not only because I was an outsider to the 'community' nor had prior experience of the 'scene' but, more importantly, because most transgender persons had been the subject of some form or other of abuse from men like myself. My work involved lengthy negotiations about how, where and with whom I would photograph each individual, with the participants themselves choosing which pictures to publish and which to omit from the book.

The scale, duration and complexity of the project opened my eyes to my own strengths and limitations not only as an individual but also as a storyteller. Until then my practice had been limited to two separate disciplines namely drawing/painting and photography. In the months following the closure of *MILKSHAKE* I became increasingly interested in new technologies and their potential for supporting multimedia

storytelling formats. In June 2014 I joined an *Advanced Multimedia Storytelling* workshop in Rome organised by the Bombay Flying Club and directed by Henrik Kastenskov. This workshop was my first hands-on engagement with the production of documentaries for the internet.

I started working with fishermen immediately after the workshop. The idea to explore maritime communities and occupations related to the sea in Malta had been at the back of my mind for a long time. The subject interested me not only because living in Malta the sea is visible from almost anywhere you stand on land. My maternal grandfather, with whom I was very close, was a dockworker and I felt that photography could help me 'reconnect with' or explore that part of my family history. I had already done a short one-week experience in 2005 photographing inside the Malta Drydocks and the desire to explore the subject in a more comprehensive manner had stayed with me.

Third-party accounts of the specific conditions of the Lampara practice as a nocturnal method of fishing fired my creative imagination with phantasmagorical scenes of bodies in toil against a backdrop of



vast stretches of water, darkness and fire (light).¹ However, my interest was not limited to the aesthetics of the environment but, more importantly, to the way it corresponded with the unfolding of the complex geopolitics of the region.

Between 2006 and 2016, while working as a photojournalist, I also came in direct contact with the issue of refugees and asylum seekers migrating by sea from the South (African continent) and East (Middle Eastern countries) to the North of the Mediterranean. The Maltese islands, being at the centre of the Mediterranean, were caught in the middle of these migration routes. In the early 2000s the first to arrive by boat ('the boat people')² were mostly persons from sub-Saharan countries. Later, in the wake of the Arab spring, particularly with the war in Syria and the instability in neighbouring Libya, migration became more diversified and the 'issue' grew exponentially. People migrating on this scale meant devastating loss of life at sea and large-

1 Lampara fishing is a nighttime activity that involves three or more boats. Pelagic fish is attracted to the surface of the water by the use of artificial light, surrounded by a purse seine net and hauled aboard the main boat.

2 For an overview see *Mediterra. Migration and Inclusive Rural Development in the Mediterranean*, International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM) and Agence française de développement (AFD), 2019. See also Mark Micallef's chapter titled *The Challenge of Normalising the Media's Migrant Crisis Machine* in Chiaro (Ed.), 2017.

scale human trafficking.

The influx of migrants combined with ailing economic and social conditions, gave the political right the opportunity to revive nationalist narratives based on xenophobic rhetoric and nostalgic confabulations of a once great mother/fatherland.³ In the latter's worldview the 'Other' is feared and loathed as a threat to time-honoured beliefs, whose alien value-system might dilute and weaken the ethos of national or collective identities.

The recent spike in conservative values is not unprecedented but what distinguishes it from similar occurrences in the past is the role played by mobile computing, the widespread use of social media and the way it favours the dissemination of populist ideas by algorithmically drawing together like-minded individuals into 'echo chambers'. The information that we consume or are being fed through the algorithm-based 'filter bubble' is a bespoke 'service' crafted to automatically select, promote or reject content according to previous personalised

³ In Malta this rhetoric is popular with groups like *Imperium Europa* (imperium-europa.org), *Malta Front* (maltafront.com) and *Moviment Patrijotti Maltin* (patrijottimaltin.org). For an overview of the European context see BBC (online), *Europe and right-wing nationalism: A country-by-country guide*, 13 November 2019; See also Ian Bremmer, *These 5 Countries Show How the European Far-Right Is Growing in Power*, Time Magazine (online), 13 September 2018

searches (Pariser, 2011). Clicks, likes, shares and comments in a pervasive networked environment now largely condition our information intake and cognitive processing. This narrowing down of content reaching our desktop and mobile computers effectively isolates us into online communities of like-minded individuals and impedes engagement with people and information that present conflicting views to ours.

Within this context, it is important to ask how virtual communities come together through a perceived feeling of common values (a culture) and how those values constitute a shared social identity and a collective narrative of self. How are these value systems constructed, modified and transformed? How does the fragmentation and overwhelming breadth of information available on social networks impact our discernibility as consumers and producers of narratives? What kind of value systems do we contribute to and how do they shape our sense of self?

It is therefore against this background of a highly mediatised and polarised global context that I make my case for the need to articulate the notion of identity as a complex narrative construct.

There are two elements to the thesis. The artworks created are; (i)

The fisherman's diaries (webdoc prototype, 2020), (ii) *Men leaving port at night and the light they carry* (film, 09:54mins, 2019), (iii) *A boat at night* (film, 09:30mins, 2019), (iv) *Dal-Baħar Madwarha* (5.1 channel 10:02mins looping sound installation, 2018) and (v) *Lampara II* (extended photographic essay, 2017-2019).

In the written component, I explore the various stages of my practice with the fishermen in Marsaxlokk (2014-2020) and how my fieldwork evolved over the years. I also reflect on my engagement with discourses on collaborative practices, authorship and the distribution of power and agency in the storytelling process. Key to my reflexivity are notions of emplacement, embodiment and sensory perception. I return to these notions repeatedly in my writing to examine my relationship with my collaborators, the socio-cultural milieu (including the historical), the natural environment in which I was working and the tools I was employing to record and interpret my experience. Subsequently, through detailed descriptions of my work, I show how these discourses inform my understanding of the interrelationship between the poetic and the prosaic and the way they co-constitute the perception of the real.

In the first part of this thesis, *Positioning*, I look closely at notions of affect and meaning making processes and how they relate to

narrative structures and the representation of Mediterranean identities. Speculating on the notion of knowledge as a complex ecosystem characterised by diversity, multiplicity, contingency, fluidity and malleability, I reflect on my situated learner approach and the process of translating my fieldwork experience into narrative form. Underlining the relational and collaborative aspect of fieldwork I reflect on the way I seek to acquire knowledge, on the conditions influencing my research and on the artifice I employ in reinterpreting my meaning making process in the form of a non-fiction story.

Drawing on the broad theoretical ground which I cover in the *Positioning* section, in the second part of this thesis I explore notions of affect and how they relate to phenomenological and materialistic approaches to emplaced research. Focusing on key aspects of my fieldwork I analyse my experience through notions of agency (or performativity) and power in narrative construction. Situating my work in direct opposition to essentialist notions of Mediterraneanity, I explore ways in which relating fishermen's stories, it was necessary to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to ethnographic research and the representation of fishermen's identities. In support of my argument for developing non-linear multimedia narrative structures, I turned to notions of the Mediterranean as a multidimensional construct. Of particular importance to my argument in this and the

following chapter are Thierry Fabre's (2013) suggestion to consider the Mediterranean as a palimpsest of stories and Iain Chambers' proposition of "a fluid archive" (2014).

In the third part I focus on *Making* and how through my expanded ethnographic experience of joining the Maltese fishermen on fishing journeys, I develop immersive storytelling works. Providing detailed descriptions and analysis of my artworks, I explore the experimentation and affordances of multimedia platforms and their potential to serve as multisensory sites of affective engagement. I also examine ways in which my engagement with multisensory ethnography furthered my interest in the materiality of the field and how this interest was conducive to exploring the haptic qualities of images and sound. I also elaborate on ways in which this heightened awareness of materiality demanded a rethink of my audio-visual production in terms of embodied practice.

In the final part of this thesis *Reflecting*, I comment on the particular conditions of fishermen's lives and how these conditions influenced the evolution of my practice. The reflection covers three areas; research, storytelling and interpretation and sheds light on the necessity of a lengthy period of fieldwork in understanding, and gaining insight into the nuanced lives of Maltese fishermen.

In the earlier stages of my work with the fishermen I focused on photography partly because of my expertise as photojournalist and photographer. By 2016 I was aware of the limits of this form and that, by expanding my practice and research approach, I would be able to respond better to the evolving multi-sensory experience of the sea and fishing to evoke my relationship with the Abela family of fishermen, Marsaxlokk, the *Joan of Arc* and the sea itself.

research questions

1. How can ethnographic research practices inform the design of non-fiction storytelling?
2. How do time-based media stimulate/aid/support reflexivity through immersion and engagement with the subject?
3. What kind of narrative strategies are necessary to shape the best interface for conveying the experience of a polyvocal ethnography?
4. What contribution do my case-studies make to shaping the understanding of narrative construction and documentary making?

POSITIONING

PART ONE

Introduction

I remember my first night on a fishing boat. I was bewildered; lost, but equally enchanted. My senses turned on, my body weak and tired. The same host of feelings accompany me today as I walk up the gangplank to the *Joan of Arc*.⁴ Seven years of fieldwork have taken nothing off the novelty of that first experience and it is that same sense of expectation, curiosity, inadequacy and vulnerability that has given

⁴ The *Joan of Arc* is a 13.5meter wooden launch built in between 1962-1964 and was commissioned by the late Joseph Abela, a.k.a. il-Glawd, the patriarch of the Abela family from Marsaxlokk, a fishing port in the South East of Malta.

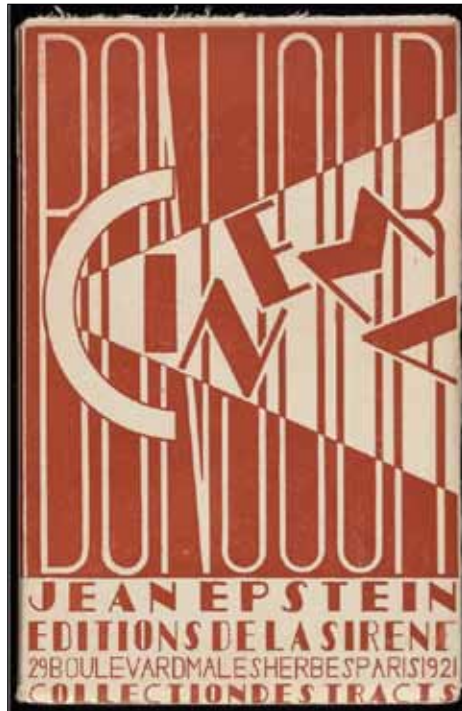


Joseph Abela
a.k.a. il-Glawd

impetus to this research.

Through the course of my project I embraced precarity not only as an inherent condition of a fisherman's lifestyle, or of being at sea, or of being Mediterranean but also as a pre-condition to experimental practice-based work. Subscribing my research to the post-modern denunciation of metanarratives and monolithic truths, in this chapter I provide an overview of the philosophical and anthropological texts I engaged with in my exploration of notions of *being* and *becoming*. These ontological and epistemological routes help trace my situational approach and structural critique to the development and construction of narratives of identity.

As an embedded researcher the main source of my preoccupations was the asymmetrical distribution and exercise of power during fieldwork and in the way(s) I choose to relate my research experience. I tackle these issues by addressing two conventions in non-fiction storytelling. First, the linearity of the Aristotelian dramatic arc that constricts storytelling to a finite program generally constituted of stringed cause and effect situations that build to a climax and a final resolution. Secondly, the methodological 'limitations' of the Malinowskian encounter as an ethnographic canon based on the presumption of detached observation and objective reporting.



At the core of this chapter is my exploration of knowledge as a generative organic system where a multitude of sources, situations, experiences and timelines commute and generate meaning. Connections, movement and multiplicity are key considerations to this understanding of knowledge as relational activity across a network of different spheres. In the first sections of this chapter I take a general view of systems theory and theories of affect to eventually narrow my focus on the dynamics of meaning making and their import for creative work and my own storytelling practice.

My encounter with Rancière's writings early in my research has had a marked influence on my work. Of particular resonance was his writing about Jean Epstein's book *Bonjour Cinema* published in 1921.⁵ Following Epstein's precocious analysis of the relationship between the cinematic medium and the representation of the subject, Rancière writes,

Life is not about stories, about actions oriented towards an end, but about situations open in every direction. Life has nothing to do with dramatic progression, but is instead a

⁵ Epstein certainly deserves more space than is accorded to him here. Both his theoretical writings about cinema and his later films have contributed much to the development of the poetic documentary. For further reading see Hamery and Thouvenel (Eds.), (2016) *Jean Epstein : Actualité et postérités*.

long and continuous movement made up of an infinity of micromovements (Rancière, 2006, p.2)

The image that this snippet from Rancière's writing conjured in my head was one of an amorphous biosphere bustling with activity. It stuck with me because it resonated with my own attempts at mapping the connections and experiences I had established with the fishermen in Marsaxlokk.⁶ More importantly, it also helped me think of the fisherman not as an isolated entity but as a social being whose identity is always in formation and always in-relation-to.

Shifting my attention to the experimental aspect of the meaning making process was a way to counter the shortcomings of essentialist narratives of identity. Deleuze and Guattari's formulation of the 'assemblage' and the rhizomatic model inspired me to think further about notions of unity, continuity and contingency and the interrelationships between the sensible and the intelligible worlds. Drawing the argument closer to practice I look at Erin Manning's work with the *SenseLab* and her call for 'research-creation' before delving into a lengthier discussion on the aspects of power, interdisciplinarity and collaborative meaning making efforts in ethnographic and

⁶ By the beginning of my PhD I had already spent three years working with the fishermen.

documentary practice.

By way of arguing for the sociality of meaning making and the pluralisation of the storytelling process I problematize the role of the researcher as author, the politics that sustained the development of documentary making and the subsequent claims and concerns about representing 'reality'. Through this theoretical framework I discuss the challenges posed by notions of objectivity and evidence-based research and the tensions arising from the engagement of creative strategies in non-fiction storytelling. Taking a relativist approach to my own storytelling practice I explore the structural fluidity and multiplicity afforded by new media and multimedia installations and their potential for narrating fishermen's identities.

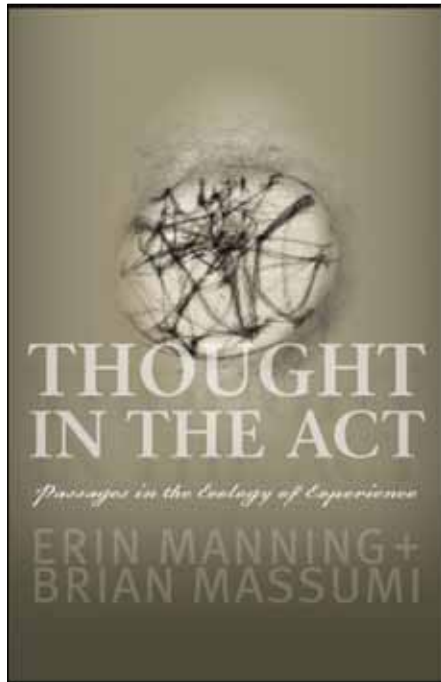
1.1 Knowledge as ecology

Rancière's idea of the real as an "infinity of micromovements" incited me to take a broader consideration of the dynamics of social intercourse. Interacting with fishermen also meant interacting with boats, engines, specialised gear, the weather, fish, consumers, suppliers, and so on and so forth. This intermeshing of human and non-human elements is also made abundantly clear in *il-Glawd's*

diaries.⁷ As an embedded practice-based researcher my most pressing questions were: Where, in this sprawling network of connections, do I stand? How am I trying to connect to this network? How have I gained access to these people and how has that process (and the tools used) influenced the kind of knowledge I was producing? Does direct engagement automatically inscribe you in the fishermen's narrative? What is the nature of my contribution to this network? Similarly, does co-presence amount to shared experience? Do years of emplacement suffice to rid me of the passive observational status of the traditional researcher and assign me a participatory role?

The roots for this self-reflexivity lie in the shifting of my attention from essentialist narratives of identity to more complex configurations of the notion of being as a perpetual state of *becoming*. In the absence of fixity, knowledge is conceived as a germinating process, an

⁷ These diaries constitute an extensive journal of personal records and were never intended as an autobiography. Il-Glawd comes across as pragmatic, economical with personal details and writes little about family relations. Yet much can be deduced by the way he recounts the daily goings-on in and around the boat, his engagement with other fishermen, his involvement in the social life in Marsaxlokk and his view of the broader Maltese context. For well over 40 years (1964 – 2008) il-Glawd unwittingly documented the day-to-day realities of small fisheries in post-colonial Malta. He chronicles the years following independence (1964) the fall of Duminku Mintoff's Socialist government (1987) and entry into the European Union (2004).



evolutionary thirsting ambition for growth.

What are the tensions arising from my role as maker, as producer, as storyteller and this indeterminacy of form?

I try to address this question by turning to Erin Manning's *SenseLab* project.⁸ The project rests on the notion of 'research-creation' as a counter methodological strategy to resist neo-liberal productivism. Manning shuns the idea of knowledge as quantifiable with clear deliverable outcomes and instead works towards supporting a loosely structured interdisciplinary space for collective artist-researcher-activist reflexivity and action (Manning and Massumi, 2014, p.84). In the website's 'about' section the project is described as,

a laboratory for thought in motion. [...] an international network of artists and academics, writers and makers, from a wide diversity of fields, working together at the crossroads of philosophy, art, and activism. [...] Their aim is to experiment with creative techniques for thought in the act. The *SenseLab's* product is its process, which is meant to disseminate. The measure of success is the creative momentum that spins off into individual and group

8 <http://senselab.ca>



*Minor Movements (events)
the SenseLab*

practices elsewhere, to seed new processes asserting their own autonomy.⁹

The lab's 'events' start through a series of reading and brainstorming sessions using guiding procedures as a common starting point for all the participating groups of people involved. This exercise leads the way towards potential approaches to explore and develop an idea or a theme. Moving from small to larger groups the lab seeks to engage people in a process of affective contagion and provoke a "creative momentum that spins off into" autonomous practices.¹⁰

The idea of affective contagion is underlined in the *SenseLab's* latest event called *Minor Movements* (2019). The leading 'provocation' for the event is, "Minor movements are not ours to make so much as ours to attune to". In the fourteen guiding points that follow that first statement the notion of 'attunement' or resonance is brought together with notions of movement, participation (agency), experience, emergence and co-constituting spatio-temporalities.¹¹ The *Minor Movements* event was taken up by participant groups across nine different countries and activities varied enormously ranging from

9 <http://senselab.ca/wp2/#homepagedesc>

10 For a more detailed explanation of the *SenseLab's* technique of "conceptual speed dating" see Massumi, 2017, pp.111-112.

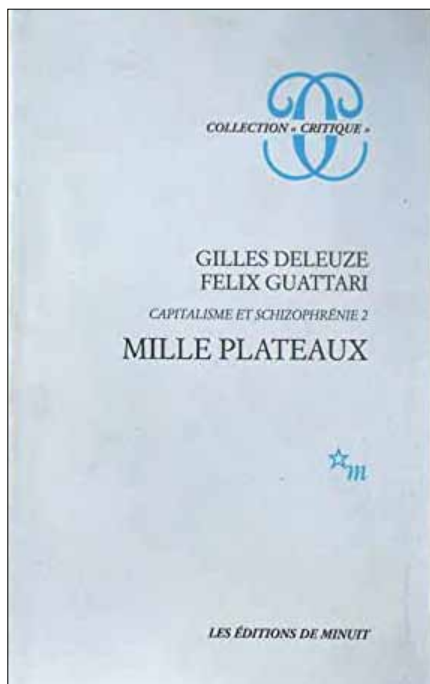
11 <http://senselab.ca/wp2/events/minor-movements>

academic fora, to collective cooking and eating, group travel and improvised artistic exercises.

The geographical breadth and the variety of types of activities engaged with by the different groups contributing to the *Minor Movements* event attest to the potential of research-creation as a method for rich multi-layered meaning making processes. In addition, one other aspect of the *SenseLab*'s project that is of particular importance to my own practice is the blurring of the boundaries between art and life. It is from this cross-border brokerage that emerge new understandings of how to “shift the conditions of experience” (*ibid.*).¹²

Manning's insistence on open interdisciplinary experimentation processes mirror those of her close associate, Brian Massumi. In *The principle of Unrest* (2017) Massumi draws focus on the transformative qualities of movement as both a physical movement in space but also as an intellectual exercise of meandering and connecting. For Massumi the individual is always in the midst of a whirlwind of activity. In an earlier interview he talks extensively about affect and highlights “the manyness of its forms” within “a dynamic unity”. He articulates this notion of affect as a transformative form of transitioning, an

¹² I conceptualise this ‘shift’ in more detail in the coming sections of this chapter.



experience of change that inhabits a progressive time-space in which meaning develops indefinitely (McKim, 2009, p.2).

Massumi attributes his position to Deleuze's idea of a continuum. In his reading of Proust's *In search of lost time* (1913) Deleuze challenges the idea of a universal a priori truth by stating that "truth has an essential relation to time" and in so doing lays the foundations to his articulation of "paradoxes of pure becoming" in *Difference and Repetition* (Deleuze, 1968, France).¹³ Spinoza's "a body is a ratio of motion and rest" was a major influence on Deleuze's understanding of a continuum as the marriage between the sensible and the intelligible. The idea of a continuum was the basis for the articulation of the 'assemblage' that Deleuze developed in collaboration with Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) (Adkins, 2015, pp.4-7).

The ratio, which Spinoza talks about and which is essential to Deleuze's paradox of continuity and the idea of assemblage in *A Thousand Plateaus*, is resonant with Gregory Bateson's systems theory based on plateaus of varying intensities. Bateson, a major figure in anthropological studies, defined systems theory as a dynamic

¹³ The date and place here are significant given the context of the student riots of May'68.

relational mutuality between the individual and the networks within which he/she operates. Within this framework, the real (thing, object, identity, ...) can only be conceived as both an organic part of a wide ecosystem but also as an ecosystem in itself.

Deleuze and Guattari furthered Bateson's *Steps to an ecology of mind* (1972) by arguing for a rhizomatic understanding of knowledge as against the conventional hierarchical 'arborescent' models. The rhizome is not a linear, chronologic system but an experimental regenerative research process. It is based on the ability to look beyond the immediacy of the object and make connections with the diversity of surrounding elements. The strength of the rhizomatic search lies in its promiscuity (Adkins, 2015, p.25)¹⁴, its ability to actively seek as many as possible 'lines of flights' or meaningful, transformative connections, across the constellation of plateaus that constitute an assemblage.

The rhizomatic is not a definite model but a provocation to look at things from different perspectives, a fresh "perceptual semiotics" (Adkins, 2015, p.32) based on the six guiding principles outlined by Deleuze and Guattari (1. connection, 2. heterogeneity, 3. multiplicity,

14 "Deleuze and Guattari call it revolution", Massumi's introduction to *A thousand Plateaus*, 1988, p.xv

4. asignifying rupture, 5. cartography, and 6. decalcomania). Although both authors could not have been aware of the eventual developments of the world wide web and its influence on the accretion and consumption of knowledge, the idea itself of having principles is indicative of the authors' awareness of the potential chaos that might ensue from unlimited connectivity. These principles also serve to return the reader to the ratio of change and stability necessary to the understanding of a continuum. In his introduction to the translation of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Brian Massumi talks about the authors intent to present the book as an assemblage and describes it as “an open equilibrium of moving parts each with its own trajectory [...] creating a fabric of intensive states between which any number of connecting routes could exist” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.xiv).

Interest in the relationship(s) between the intelligible and the sensible and the cross-boundary brokerage of reality has resulted in greater interdisciplinarity in the social sciences and humanist studies (the Affective turn). The potentially transformative passages, connections, exchanges and fertilisation across areas that are key to the idea of '*becoming*' have stimulated debates on affect, empathetic knowledge and collaborative processes.

1.2 Systems of representation

Manning's idea of research-creation subverts conventional hierarchical power dynamics by the way it defines affective contagion as participation of and contribution by the different parts of a collective. The transversal distribution of influences across an ecosphere of mutuality breaks categorical and disciplinary boundaries that stifle the meaning making process. Using the *SenseLab* as a long-standing project that thrives off collective interdisciplinary experimentation, I engage with a discourse on narrative power and creative enterprise as both a response and a resistance to socio-political influences on the production and consumption of stories.

The exploration of the interrelations between the political and the aesthetic as expressions of power and control marks the development of Rancière's 'regimes of representation' whereby he intended "to reject interpretations that frame artistic practices in linear, mono-causal historical narratives" (Deranty, 2010, p.118).

Based on his earlier understanding of "the distribution (partage) of the sensible", Rancière developed egalitarian 'systems of representation' composed of three different regimes; the ethical regime (ontological veracity, Plato's ideal model), the representational

or poetic regime (based on structures and norms) and the aesthetic regime (expression as an end in itself). While the latter represents the ethos of Modernity, each individual regime - defined by a distinct set of principles and internal contradictions - should not be confused with historical periods. Deranty calls them “meta-historical categories” or “ideas of art” that are not mutually exclusive and can exist contemporaneously like in the case of cinema (*ibid.*, p.121).

Rancière conceives the aesthetic regime as a product of the socio-political revolutions of the past two centuries and the prevalence of democratic thought. The aesthetic marks the break of “arts and practices” from their “place in the division of social conditions” (Rancière, 2013, p.IX), as a “practice at the service of a particular consumption” (*ibid.*, p.229) that had previously defined the ethical and the representative regimes.

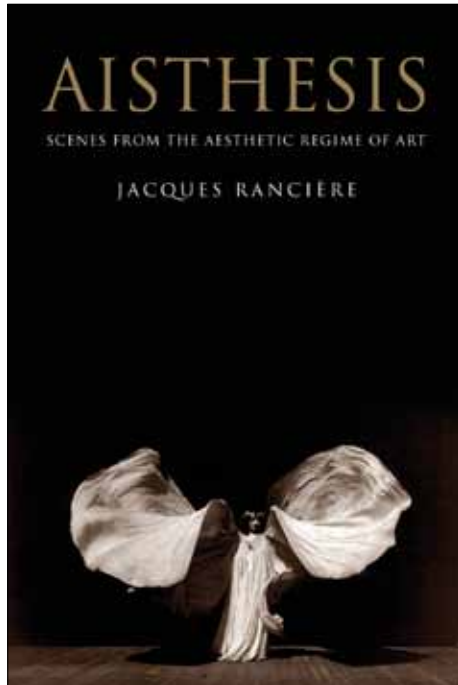
As a practitioner intent on breaking confirmative representations of stereotyped identities I am particularly drawn to the ‘mechanisms’ of the aesthetic regime as the most politically radical of the three. Understanding the relational dynamics of the regime is necessary. I also pay attention to Rancière’s own cautionary stance vis-à-vis the degree of radicalism in the development of the aesthetic. This caution is expressed in recognizing the coexistence of “structures of hierarchy

(the police) with the egalitarian challenge to these structures (politics proper)” (Deranty, 2010, p.127).

The link between the artistic and the political spheres in Rancière’s thought is evidenced in the intimate relationship he establishes between the five basic constitutive elements of his regimes:

the world itself, in its material and human dimensions; what in the world is significant (both meaningful and socially valuable), and thus worthy of representation; language, or speech, or text, as the discursive articulation of meaning; the artefacts in which meaning is expressed, in verbal, pictorial, bodily, cinematic or other forms, for which Rancière uses the generic term image; and finally the community, to which the artist addresses himself/herself, effectively as an actual audience, but also more loosely as a virtual addressee of the artistic message. (*ibid.*, p.120)

Rancière explores this relationship, its transformative qualities and the subsequent emergence of the artistic through the fourteen different scenes that he proposes in *Aisthesis: scenes from the aesthetic regime of art* (2013). In the prelude to the scenes he provides an outline of the idea guiding his readings of the scenes.



The term Aisthesis has designated the mode of experience according to which, for two centuries, we perceive very diverse things, whether in their techniques of production or their destination, as all belonging to art. This is not a matter of 'reception' of works of art. Rather, it concerns the sensible fabric of experience within which they are produced. These are entirely material conditions – performance and exhibition spaces, forms of circulation and reproduction – but also modes of perception and regimes of emotion, categories that identify them, thought patterns that categorize and interpret them. These conditions make it possible for words, shapes, movements and rhythm to be felt and thought as art. [...] It shows how a regime of perception, sensation and interpretation of art is constituted and transformed by welcoming images, objects and performances that seemed most opposed to the idea of fine art [...] It shows how art, far from floundering upon these intrusions of the prose of the world, ceaselessly redefined itself – exchanging, for example, the idealities of plot, form and painting for those of movement, light and the gaze, building its own domain by blurring the specificities that define the arts and the boundaries that separate them from the prosaic

world. [...] Art is given to us through these transformations of the sensible fabric, at the cost of constantly merging its own reasons with those belonging to other spheres of experience. (Rancière, 2013, p.X-XI)

What Rancière highlights in this passage is the fluidity inherent in the meaning-making process or experience of 'Art' by pointing at the interaction between the different spheres perpetually reconfiguring the sensible fabric. The symbiosis of the poetic and the prosaic, two domains that were previously regulated by separate value systems, reaffirm Rancière's belief in equality as a key concept behind the radicalism defining Modernity as presented in his Aesthetic regime. As I have noted earlier, this fluidity is central to Rancière's critical history of cinema *Film Fables* (2006).

Rancière is primarily concerned with what constitutes the 'real', the relationship between thought and sensibility and the reflective qualities of the cinematic medium as "experience, art and the idea of art". (I return to this in the following section.) At the heart of this ontology he identifies the three main figures spawned by cinema, "the directors, the audience and critics and cinephiles" (*ibid.*, p.5). This complex relationship determines the way meaning(s) is/are negotiated through this "infinity of micromovements". Meaning is

relational. The 'real' is no longer that which the mechanical eye captures but a sum of evolving connections within and beyond the image and/or the medium itself.

1.3 Cultural fictions and identity as a narrative construct

In the earlier sections I have shown how the “sensible fabric of experience” is an on-going experiment in meaning making; a tentative semiotic exercise for those inhabiting the liminal spatio-temporality between the prosaic and the poetic worlds. In this section I focus on narrative constructs and the employment of repetition and rupture as necessary strategies in the process of identity formation.

Through this notion of *becoming* I seek to expose some of the problems linked with the representation of fishermen and farmers and the way such representations are often conveniently inscribed in a discourse about 'authenticity'. My understanding is that these problems arise from the way such trades directly engage with the natural world and how they still largely rely on the transference of knowledge through kinship. These conditions of work might have contributed to the mistaken association of 'authenticity' with fixity and the misinterpretation of continuity and lineage as temporal extensions of the past rather than contingent processes in perpetual

renewal.

Contributing to the misrepresentation of fishermen in particular is the perception that they operate outside the conditions of the Modern industrialised world and urban environments and are free from the constraints of an enclosed workspace, a nine-to-five routine, the dependence on technology and artificial lighting. They are also at times seen as “anarchic villains” (MacCay, 1978, p.398) operating outside the law or reach of regulatory bodies (VonGinkel, 2008; see also McGoodwin, 2001, 1.5).

Fishermen and farmers are regularly inscribed in the narrative of the ‘authentic’ as that who leads a primitive existence in an idyllic parallel reality. Elevated to ‘heritage’ and ‘traditional’ status they are objectified as commodities that fit the narrative expectations of stereotyped nostalgic confabulations rooted in a purist understanding of identity, race and nationhood.

In *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* (1988), Judith Butler articulates identity as a construct, “a stylized repetition of acts” (emphasis in original), pertaining to a specific time period. Butler sees artifice as the pre-condition for what is essentially nothing but “a constituted

social temporality, a compelling illusion, an object of belief (emphasis in original) borne out of social custom and specific historical and cultural contexts (Butler, 1988, p.520). Furthering this with a discourse on ‘cultural fictions’ she talks of gender in terms of project and strategy thus inscribing identity within reproducible normative performative systems where “those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (*ibid.*, p.522).¹⁵

Failure defies expectations and, as Butler underlines, to err is to disrupt a sequential process of repetition. As a radical course of action ‘disruption’ is subjected to castigation and this in itself may be revelatory of the political potential of rupture as an expression of an identity that resists facile cataloguing.

15 Edward Ball follows Butler’s idea of performativity when addressing notions of commodification, ‘ethnicity’ and the cultural expectations of forces such as the tourism industry. Ball writes, “A constructed ethnicity is a national, regional, sometimes racial identity produced in the presence of, and for, a spectator. This performative dimension within ethnicity is based on the presumption that culture is not written, as theorists of language might build their metaphor, but staged. The tourist industry contains the clearest examples of ethnicity produced as an event” (Ball in *Visual Display – Culture Beyond Appearances*, Cooke and Wollen (Eds.) 1995, p.144) I will touch upon the issue of identity, commodification and the spectacular again in part four of this thesis.

Jerome Bruner takes a similar position in an article titled *A Narrative Model of Self-Construction* (1997). Quoting Burke (1945), White (1981), Labov (1967) and his own earlier writings about autobiographical narratives he stresses “that the very *engine* of narrative is trouble” (emphasis in original). His argument follows Butler’s in that he defines trouble as an event that disrupts, violates, jeopardises “the legitimacy” of “the canonical state of the world”. Bruner tells us that,

Trouble, then, may not only be the engine of narrative, but the impetus for extending and elaborating our concepts of Self. Small wonder that it is the chosen medium for dealing not only with trouble, but for constructing and reconstructing the Self. (Bruner, 1997, pp.16-17)

Another significant perspective on repetition and disruption that I found particularly relevant to my research is one of three ‘narrative’ functions of repetition identified by Hal Foster. The latter argues that repetition itself can “produce an interruption, a crack or a gap, that might allow a different reality to be glimpsed.” As an example Foster references Ben Lerner’s choice of epigram for his 2014 novel titled *10:04*, “The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything will be just as it is ... Everything will be as it is now, just a

little different” (Foster, 2017, p.170).

These perspectives resonate with my fieldwork experience. Central to my research is the multilayered nature of time in the construction of identities that, as I underlined earlier, are bound to the idea of continuity and perpetuation (including the acquisition and transmission of skills but also tangible assets like boats, nets and property). Very much like the fishermen themselves, my own learning process and reflexive aspect of my practice was based on repetition and the idea of return to the same. Seeking to understand better the dynamics of duration, habituation, empathetic learning and the way I engage and transfer acquired knowledge to third parties I started looking at narratives of identities as expressed in experimental artistic practices.

Looking beyond the linear or sequential unfolding of events and breaking with the cause-effect binary system, experimental time-based media techniques as forms that engender reflexivity have a long-standing history. Editing techniques were central to intellectually sophisticated debates surrounding the development of audio-visual productions throughout the twentieth century. The Surrealists and Dadaists employed discordance for expressive means (Clifford, 1981, p.541) while early experiments and writings by the likes of Sergei

Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov expounded the creative potential of the filmic medium and visual time-based narrative structure. Many notable filmmakers like Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane* (1941) or Theo Angelopoulos in *Ulysses Gaze* (1995) have explored identity as a complex construct through a non-linear plot structure and the use of unconventional photographic and editing techniques.

Significantly, in the hands of non-fiction storytellers, these same techniques become suspicious and this can be seen in the debates generated by films like *Moi, un noir (I, a negro, 1958)* by Jean Rouch, who pioneered the essay film form and ethno-fiction. Similar debates surround *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* by Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989), the more recent documentary films like *Stories we tell* (2012) by Sarah Polley (Waites, 2015) and to a certain extent 'journalistic' works like *Hypernormalisation* (2016) by Adam Curtis, who questions the relationship between the establishment and mass-media by remixing archival footage and newsreel (Doyle, 2017; Glazzard, 2015). The latter uses an exploratory technique based on re-telling, re-organisation or re-contextualisation that was previously used by the likes of Chris Marker in *Letter from Siberia* (1957) and Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle* (1973).

In discussing non-fiction time-based media works Elizabeth Cowie

talks about the “unrepresented that is unrepresentable” and which she not only distinguishes from the real but also from the imaginary. She develops her argument by drawing on a number of seminal thinkers and ideas¹⁶ and in so doing underscores cinema’s long-standing engagement and preoccupation with the emergence of the real through the stitching (editing, montage) of images and time that are disassociated with the classical logic of filmic continuity. She articulates this as

[an] outsideness of thinking [that] suspends the spectator in a state of uncertainty where it is impossible to know or predict in advance which direction change will take. It produces an image becoming, rather than being. It thus includes a hesitation, an uncertainty and a suspense as to what might be possible, one that can never be fully resolved by the actual thought we are led to. (Cowie, 2009, p.131)

16 Ranging from Freud’s idea of ‘the uncanny’, Lacan’s ‘the real’, Michael Renov’s notion of ‘visual epiphany’, Deleuze’s take on Dziga Vertov’s rational-irrational intervals in cinema and Rodowick’s idea of an interstice and false continuity.

1.4 Mediterraneanities and Mediterraneanism

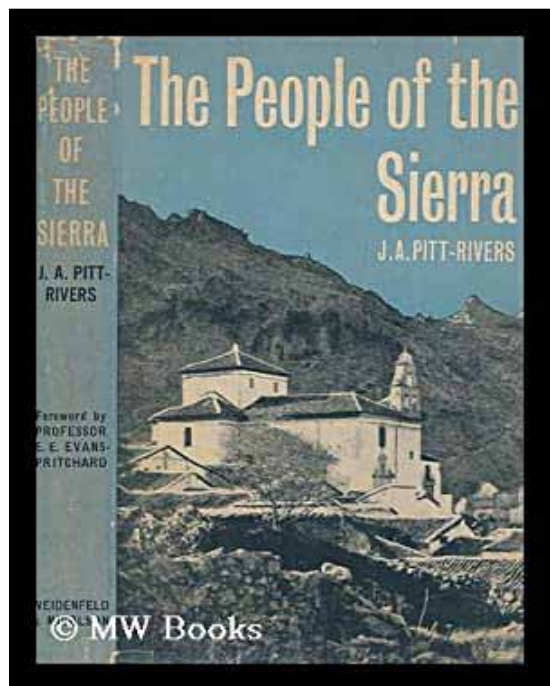
My arguing for the representation of identities as complex formative processes is also grounded in the various ways anthropologists and other social scientists have problematized narratives about the Mediterranean and the people living on its shores. These narratives often reflect the political, commercial and religious interests that surrounded the region throughout its long and rich history. In other words, these narratives express the asymmetrical distribution of power and wealth along the shores of the Mediterranean and as such sing the glories of victors and rulers to the detriment and exclusion of the ordinary folk and the subjugated. In countering these essentialist, monolithic narratives I turn to unconventional storytelling structures that better reflect the heterogeneity of people across the Mediterranean and the diverse and complex realities that they inhabit.

Thierry Fabre's conception of the Mediterranean as "a palimpsest of stories" (Thomaneck and Gros, 2013) is instrumental here. In the second part of this thesis I also extend this exploration of multi-layered storytelling forms by borrowing extensively from Iain Chamber's articulation of the Mediterranean as *A fluid archive* (2014). I return to Fabre's and Chambers' metaphors repeatedly throughout this thesis as the basic images that I speculate on in developing my

own experiments with multimodal non-fiction storytelling.

Malleability and the experimental are intrinsic qualities of the palimpsestic form. A palimpsest is a layering of meanings over failed, incomplete or unfinished acts of effacement – a testimony to the resilience of stories that refuse to be wiped out. New stories ‘sit’ between the lingering shadows of previous words and the worlds these represent. Reading, or the search for a meaningful narrative, can be done in both a lateral as well as a transversal manner.

Fabre was writing in the wake of the growing political influence of the European Union and the rise of political Islam that compelled researchers to further acknowledge the heterogeneity of the Mediterranean as a multipolar ‘reality’. This was in line with anthropology’s evolution as a subject discipline into a more ‘politically correct’ practice denouncing stereotyping and professing a radical revision of the encounter as its primary model of inquiry. This new critical approach shaped the cultural turn and the rise of reflexive ethnography (Davies, 2008; Foley, 2002; Ritschel, 2009) that followed Lyotard’s rejection of metanarratives in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), the publishing of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979) and subsequent texts such as *Writing Culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography* by Clifford and Marcus (1986).



Inspired by Said's *Orientalism*, Michael Herzfeld coined the term 'Mediterraneanism' to denounce "the politics of knowledge that includes in its purview the constitution of what we are pleased to call 'the West'" (Harris, 2004, p.47). Herzfeld highlights the problems with conventional categories in anthropology, questions the legitimacy of their use and the motivations behind such (mis)representations. He was particularly critical of the way 'Honour and Shame' was used as a paradigm by which pan-Mediterranean Anglo-Saxon anthropologists (Peristiany, 1965) sought to define 'the' Mediterranean. Similarly, Pina Cabral (1989) and Llobera (1986), amongst others, contested the reductionist interpretations of complex phenomena.

Until then, Braudel's (1949) definition of "the Mediterranean as a space of unity and coherence, with a long-term continuity (*longue durée*)" (Schafer, 2014, p.57) and his emphasis on the overarching influence of a shared climate, had been widely influential and equally controversial across the social sciences. Pan-Mediterranean anthropologists like Davis (1977), Boissevain (1979) and Gilmore (1982) had been seduced by its potential as a theoretical framework underpinning the 'tribalist' reproach levelled at Pitt-Rivers's *The People of the Sierra* (1954) and the subsequent studies of small isolated rural villages.

It is in this context that John Davis's produced *People of the Mediterranean: An Essay in Comparative Social Anthropology* (1977), a monumental endeavour where he surveys and provides a critical comparison of published works. Davis based his study on five categories: economy, stratification, politics, family and kinship, and history throughout which he seeks anthropological meaning to the term 'Mediterranean' in "those institutions, customs and practices which result from the conversation and commerce of thousands of years, the creation of very different peoples who have come into contact round the Mediterranean shores" (Boissevain, 1979, p.13).

Davis also identified some of the problems of the structuralist-functional approach adopted by him and his peers. Boissevain (2011; Boissevain, *et al.*, 1979), Gilmore (1982) and to a significantly wider extent Albera, Blok, and Bromberger, (eds., 2001) have documented, discussed and analysed the ensuing controversies extensively but has remained cautious on the possible future of an 'Anthropology of the Mediterranean'.

Boissevain stands out as the most widely recognised anthropologist who has worked extensively in Malta. Influenced by his mentors at the London School of Economics, Raymond Firth and Lucy Mair (both past students and close collaborators of Malinowski), his approach to



Jeremy Boissevain,
21 November 2007,
Naxxar, Malta.

fieldwork was one based on studying the individual's agency within a social network. Moving away from the holistic structural-functionalist emphasis on social systems, Boissevain focused on a person's behaviour and motivations. His extensive studies of patronage are particularly interesting mainly because he posits his argument within a broader historical post-colonial discourse on regional identity and the evolution of hierarchies (the exercise and structures) of power. In addition he also wrote extensively on mass tourism in the Mediterranean, the reception of, and the adaptation to, external influences and the dynamics of exchange between the local population and the 'foreigners' (Boissevain, 2011, 1996, 1979).

Boissevain's writings on patronage and his analysis of Maltese micropolitics as multi-layered, inter-relational networks of "friends of friends" inform my attempt at understanding Il-Glawd as the patriarch of the Abela family, his command of the men working on the *Joan of Arc* and his role as a 'politically' active member of the community. It is from within this social framework that I try to first understand 'il-Glawd's' behaviour (allegiances, beliefs, conflicts, ...) as 'narrated' in his diaries and as recounted by family and past crew members.

More specific is Finn Wilhelmsen's PhD thesis *Marsaxlokk: An ethnography of a Maltese fishing village*, completed in 1976. This

research reflects the surge of maritime anthropological studies that took place in the mid 1970s (Prieto, 2016) and constitutes the most detailed study on the subject to date. It is an essential reference to my case-study particularly when comparing the experiences of Il-Glawd, Ġużeppi and Antoine as three generations of men working on the same boat and doing the same job over a fifty year period. “Finn”, as is still fondly remembered in Marsaxlokk, opted for a holistic approach to the village where he tried to identify cultural patterns and how fishermen respond to external forces that might benefit or imperil their livelihood. Central to Wilhelmssen’s discourse is the exercise, manifestation and negotiation of power within the informal social networks operating at the local community level in Marsaxlokk and perhaps more importantly, the asymmetric relationship between the fishermen and those who constitute their “network of ties with government officials, auctioneers, retailers or fishmongers, and consumers” (1976, pp.5-6).¹⁷

17 These kind of conflicts are still a major cause of worry for fishermen as can be seen in the nine interviews which I did for a short film commissioned by Low Impact fishers of Europe (lifeplatform.eu) called *Cast adrift in a sea of challenges: perspectives from Maltese fishers* (2019). Luchino Visconti’s film *La Terra Trema* (1948) is entirely built around this theme. See also Michel Callon’s *Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay*, 1986.; Thompson, 1983.

Spread over sixteen chapters the study ranges from a description of *The field situation* in chapter I to an extended detailed report on the attitudes, beliefs, changes, behavioural patterns and the intricacies of local networks. Against this cultural background Wilhelmsen ties the issue of identification with crew composition in chapter X, *Identification as fishermen and crew membership* (p.293) to location in chapter XI, *Residency as a cohesive factor* (p.307). In so doing he first underlines the hierarchies of power stemming from a patriarchal society (characterised by the obligations and responsibilities towards family and kin and a general sense of communal belonging and solidarity with members of the same trade albeit differences in opinions, perceived abilities and rivalries)¹⁸ and then looks at how the fishermen respond to the dictates of regulatory bodies and market representatives. This divide is further accentuated by what Wilhelmsen, quoting Redfield, calls a “part society” within the “greater society” (*ibid.*, p.419) where the fishermen from Marsaxlokk distinguish themselves from both the other fishermen on the islands

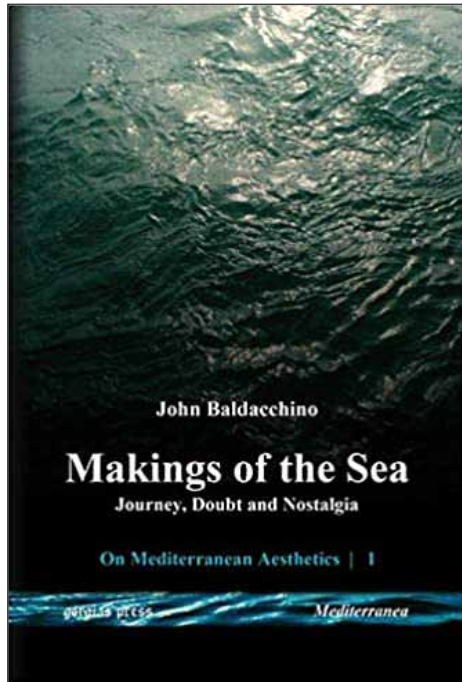
¹⁸ The importance accorded to kinship, and this is still evident today even if to a much lesser degree, is partly due to the perpetuation of a system of seniority where the eldest members of the family have the final say (or are consulted) on the merit of their more expansive experience. Pride in the accumulated knowledge that is handed down from generation to generation and the reluctance to share that knowledge with fishermen from outside the family circle also plays a part in a fisherman’s sense of self (van Ginkel, 2014).

as well as from the rest of the Maltese population.¹⁹

Jon Mitchell shared similar interests with his predecessors in trying to understand Maltese identity through behavioural patterns as expressions of power and belonging (pride, loyalty, rivalry, competition, clashes, conflict, ...). His writings address Maltese identity and the shifts in how the islands' European and Southern Mediterranean heritage are articulated. My interest in Mitchell's work lies specifically in how he argues for a re-evaluation of national identity not as a set of distinguishing qualities defined by historical narratives or 'content' but as an on-going process of discussion (2003, pp.377-398).

This re-orientation of the notion of identity from 'content to process' is also present in John Baldacchino's *Makings of the sea: Journey,*

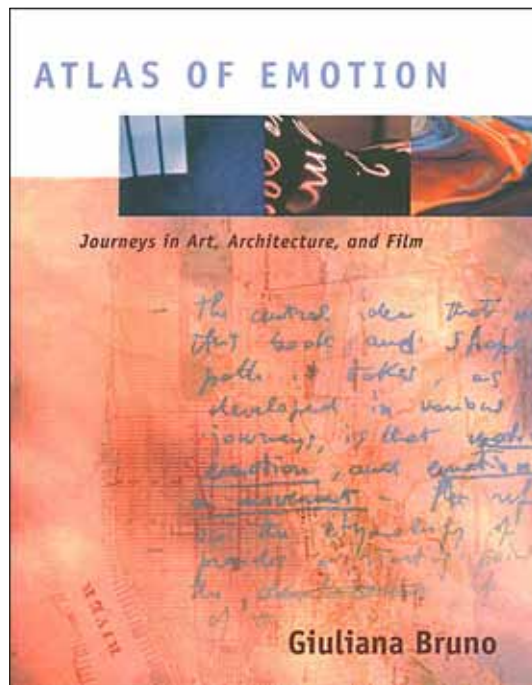
¹⁹ Wilhelmsen describes how at the time of his research many fishermen from Marsaxlokk chose to marry the daughters of other fishermen from the same village. The practical reason behind this was one of pure convenience: a man and woman coming from a similar background could understand, bear and manage better the very particular nature of a fisherman's work and the demands this imposed on domestic life. In so doing the fishermen were also restricting their social interactions and limiting their own engagement with people living inland. I take up this discussion again and at some length in the second part of this thesis.



Doubt and Nostalgia (2010). Citing an extensive array of art, literary works and films, Baldacchino provides a provocative insight into “the Mediterranean logic where journey becomes synonymous with the making of truth and where history bequeaths its grand narratives from the privacy of individuals who live and inhabit their own physical space” (*ibid.*, p.6). At the heart of this epistemology is a preoccupation with personal accounts of place, time and home(coming) as expressions of the Mediterranean’s plurality(ies). By giving precedence to the poetic and the subjective over the historical and the objective (all very problematic terms) it promotes a transversal or organic, rather than a linear kind of journeying.

1.5 Collaboration and creative research

Understanding the Mediterranean as a heterogeneous site of on-going reflexivity became pivotal to orienting my research towards the dynamics of organic non-linear forms of storytelling. In this section I look at recent approaches to fieldwork as a site characterised by complexity and multiplicity. How does the researcher negotiate his/her position within the diversity of the field? How can the construction of ethnographic knowledge benefit from multidisciplinary approaches to fieldwork?



In pursuing this line of questioning I try to identify the narrative devices and storytelling formats through which I can convey a rich account of my experience with Maltese fishermen. I focus on affective perspectives for ethnographic processes that do not break down the field of study in distinct categories but methods that allow a more holistic approach. I am also interested in tentative frameworks of research that include the speculative and the subjective aspect of the journeying experience across a field of study.

Moving beyond the quantifiable and the objective reporting of observable behavioural patterns I find inspiration in Giuliana Bruno's highly personal take on the notion of psychogeographies as emotional itineraries. In *The Atlas of Emotions: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* (2002) she makes the case for an 'architexture' of the cinematic experience which she describes as "the fabric of this fabrication" (Bruno, 2002, p.357). Bruno's point of departure is an understanding of cinema as a hybrid form of art, film and architecture through which the spectator moves and is moved. The spectator is affected by the way he or she are able to journey within this broad relational structure that extends the boundaries of audio-visual 'production' to include the cultural context as well as the personal experiences of the spectator. To engage with the artefact in a meaningful way is to experience its architexture and this is attainable by moving with its flow. What's

particularly interesting about this notion of affect is that Bruno combines the spectator's ability to move with an analysis of the haptic capacity of the filmic medium. Underlining the relationship between feelings and textures Bruno sets in motion a provocative discourse on how audio-visual artefacts embody sensory epistemologies.

Bruno's positioning resonates with Raymond Williams' understanding of "structures of feeling". First used in a *Preface to Film* (1954, co-authored with Michael Orrom) the term, although variously applied and its meaning extensively debated (see for example Highmore, 2016), has come to refer to the breadth of socio-cultural relations through which we filter and give meaning to our everyday experiences. Highmore explains it is Williams' way of stressing the participatory role of artefacts "as parts of a social totality" and that culture is a "whole way of life" that "needs to be seen through the transdisciplinary optic of anthropology" (Highmore, 2016, p.149).

My understanding of Williams' proposal is that artefacts need to be considered as both material objects with which we can relate to through the senses as well as cultural containers of time, memory and different technologies. Both forms of engagements contribute to the way we 'feel' about a person, an object or a situation.

The constitution of feeling as knowledge is thus not only related to purely material properties but also to a broader host of interrelated socio-cultural conditions. It is with this understanding that I consider two different proposals for doing ethnography. The first is sensory ethnography as argued for by Sarah Pink and the second is the multi-sited ethnography proposed by George Marcus.

Pink's sensory ethnography draws on a long list of previous studies that gave rise to the sensory turn in anthropology as comprehensively documented in the massive, four volume, one hundred essay compendium *Senses and Sensation: Critical and Primary Sources* (2018) edited by David Howes.²⁰ What brings anthropologists to sensory studies seems to be a common interest in addressing the deficiency of words and language as means for conveying embodied knowledge. While research in the field has grown and there is at present very healthy critical debates about the validity and application of sensation-based research, the subject remains highly problematic most notably for the difficulty in defining key terms like perception, sensation and feeling, the arguments surrounding the organisation, classification or ordering of the senses and finally its radical approach

²⁰ An overview of the evolution of *Multisensory Anthropology* is also provided in an article by Howes in the annual Review of Anthropology, 2019, pp.17-28.

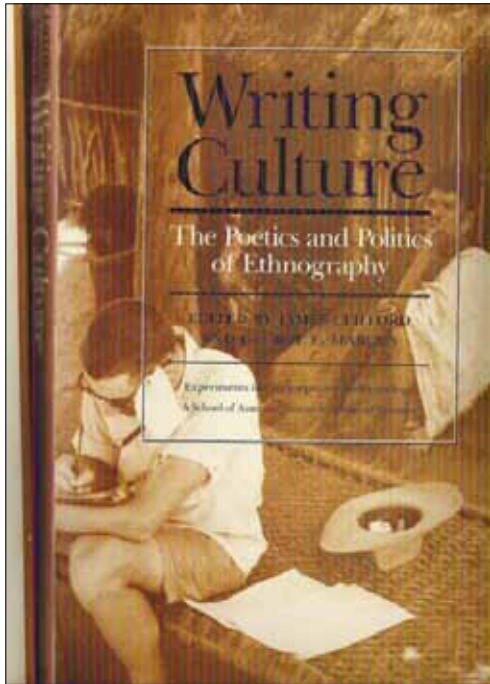
to academic interpretation (Jackson, 2018, p.13).

Pink acknowledges “a tension between theoretical and methodological scholarship and approaches,” and highlights the way anthropologists, “are creating new empathetic routes through which to broker everyday knowledge. [...] It might allow us to understand anthropological practice as something that can move across boundaries between scholarly, applied, public, activist categories, and as something that is redefined in practice” (Pink, 2011, p.451).

Echoing Manning’s proposition to undo the dichotomy between research and the creative process, Pink emphasises the subjectivity of the researcher as the prime receiver, processor and transmitter of knowledge. She argues that the mediation process that happens through the researcher’s body should be reflected in the ethnographic account in any form and context (academic, artistic, public intervention, ...) as it may be. Further to this Pink says, “Ethnography [...] does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers’ experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced (Pink 2007a, p.22 as cited by Pink, 2009, p.8).

In a similar bid for greater “transparency” in the ethnographic process George Marcus proposes a collaborative practice that attends to the “urgent need” for ethnography to take the form and function as “mediation and intervention within the communities of its subject(s)” (Marcus, 2010, p.275). His formulation of a multi-sited ethnographic method is structured on a broad, holistic framework of interconnected ‘sites’ of varying intensities. His idea is founded around “working, committed collaborations, and the understanding of imaginaries and their consequences” and “entails constructing fieldwork as a social symbolic imaginary with certain posited relations among things, people, events, places and cultural artefacts, and a literally multi-sited itinerary as a field of movement emerges in the construction of such an imaginary” (*ibid.*, p.268).

By stressing the need for a multiplicity of connections and associations (or ‘lines of flight’) Marcus allies the sensible and the intelligible, the prosaic and the symbolic into a shared interrogative space. He redefines the encounter as a collaborative literal and symbolic spatiality and articulates it by referring to socially conscious performative artworks (installation-performance-happenings) and the formulation of relational aesthetics by Nicolas Bourriaud in the 90s, “where spectacle is conceived as symbolic act, stimulating a critical reflexivity on the part of participants and observers” (*ibid.*).



Marcus is enthusiastic about what he terms an “inside-outness” of a scene of spectacle; the evident playfulness, openness and the experimental nature of the ‘artistic’ process as not only part of, but in itself, a site where meaning is negotiated. “The scene of encounter in contemporary ethnography leads away from a literal site-specificity to fieldwork,” where the spectacle is reconfigured as a broad relational system of collaborative interrogation (reflexivity) and experimentation similar to Hans-Jörg Rheinberger’s ‘epistemic thing’ (*Ibid.*, p.273).

One can trace the idea of a multi-sited ethnography to two seminal texts in the history of anthropology with which Marcus himself was involved. The first was *Time and the Other: How Anthropology makes its object* (originally published in 1983) by Johannes Fabian. The other book was *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986) which Marcus co-edited with James Clifford.

Fabian, Marcus and Clifford argue that the sense of proximity between the observer and the observed achieved through immersive ethnographic practice (speaking with others in the here and now) is often lost in subsequent anthropological accounts (speaking about others) of this “encounter with the Other”. While Marcus and Clifford identified this temporal distancing as “pastoral allegories of ‘other’”

(as cited by Edwards in Banks and Morphy (Eds.), 1999, p.70),
Fabian's critique centres on what he terms as a "denial of coevalness".

The shared conditions (temporal, spatial, cultural, economic, etc) in which the ethnographic encounter has taken place are perversely reconfigured to enforce a willed sense of alterity on the subject. In other words, the 'observed' is subjugated to 'an-other' time and space, a distancing that in the context of Fabian's and Clifford's writings carries the mark of Western colonialist endeavours. (Fabian saw his ideas as complementary to Said's *Orientalism*.)

In reviewing Fabian's book Marcus notes how the author moves from his critique of the spatialisation of time to anthropology's need to directly engage with (rather than observe) activities producing cultural and symbolic meaning(s). Marcus says that in Chapter 4 of Fabian's book, "Production becomes Fabian's keyword, analysis in terms of which he believes will shatter the embedded strategies of denying the contemporaneity of the ethnographic subject" (Marcus, 1984, p.1024).

However, Marcus remains critical of Fabian's emphasis on the issue of coevalness and time as the core of all the ills of ethnography calling it, "a flawed strategy of general critique, since time as a theme cannot

encompass, except obliquely and awkwardly, all the dimensions that account for the predicaments of theory and practice in contemporary sociocultural anthropology” (*ibid.*, p.1025).

1.6 Actor Network Theory, translation and heterogeneous engineering

Attending to the issue of mediation in the field was a priority for my practice. In previous sections I explored how different scholars took the subject-object dichotomy to task and proposed alternative epistemologies as representational constructs. In this section I look further into the dynamics of mediation as a process of translating lived experience. Through the conceptual framework provided by Actor Network Theory (ANT) I return to the issue of mapping heterogeneous networks by asking basic questions like (i) what/who is being translated, (ii) who is translating and (iii) through which medium?

Focusing on socio-technological processes ANT proposes a new form of network-analysis characterised by a materialistic and/or empirical form of semiotics. Convening the tangible (human and non-human) as a self-sustaining economy of values, ANT proposes to trace the associative trajectories in order to explain how the social is

‘performed’.²¹

More than a theory ANT is a sociological method of following and describing anew the symmetry between the social and that which is traditionally understood as non-social.²² Both are considered in material terms. None is privileged over the other and “the divide between scientific and technical content and social context is nullified” (Cressman, 2009, p.8).

ANT applies the term ‘actant’ to any entity that has the potential for agency within a network. The ability to associate, connect or exercise influence within a network is the only quality that defines an actant. Any a priori categorization is disregarded. Animals, machines, objects, texts, ideas, etc have the same functional status accorded to humans in the formation of a meaningful context. In so doing ANT refutes essentialist paradigms for a semiotic approach that bypasses realist and social constructs.

21 “ANT has gone by different names: The Sociology of Translation (Callon 1980, 1981, 1986b), Co-Word Analysis (Callon, Law & Rip 1986) and Actant-Rhizome Ontology (Latour 1999)” (Cressman, 2009, p.2).

22 For example Law says, “the social is nothing other than patterned networks of heterogeneous materials” (Law, 1992, p.2).

An actant is 'simply' any operational unit (a sign) that performs within, and embodies, an organic assembly of relations.²³ The actor-network combination befits the marriage between action and structure and accentuates the importance given to the process of meaning-making.

The understanding of what constitutes a network is akin to the rhizomatic model provided by Deleuze. Key to this understanding of 'network' is the potential for internal struggles, conflicts or disruptions that might transform associations or form alliances.

ANT scholars reject the idea of a fixed social structure or order. The social can, in their view, only be understood through a debate on the relational, contingent and thus precarious affairs that constitute the actor-network as a place of constant struggle. This tension brings to the fore two crucial elements in understanding the ANT methodology; first that there is no centre but a multitude of shifting points within a network and secondly that analysis needs to look at the relational effects responsible for the ordering within the network. In other words it is an analysis of the conditions that shape (what happens in/

²³ Anti-hierarchical meaning making does not necessarily take the form of network. Tim Ingold prefers the term 'meshwork' (Ingold, 2006, p.13).

during) the translation process that leads to punctualisation.

In the following paragraphs I engage with this equitable semiotic method of inquiry, or 'generalised symmetry', to further my understanding of networks vis-à-vis narrative constructs and how this can challenge my practice and the notions of objectivity, representation and power that inform my story-telling. I elaborate on the notion of translation through a few core concepts such as (the opening of) black-boxes, punctualisation and 'heterogeneous engineering'.

The focus on science and technology brings attention to the role of the 'engineer-sociologists' - those who work towards advancing the fields, those tasked with understanding and solving scientific and technical problems, conflicts, resistances and imbalances. These are the scientists and engineers in whom ANT sees a direct link to the social world in which they operate and which they form.

This kind of micro-level interest in the actors that manage or contribute to the labs (in the widest sense of the word) where the socio-technical is developed is the most explicit ethnographic quality in the ANT methodology.

ANT marked a radical shift for the methods of inquiry traditionally used in the human sciences. The attention ANT granted to how technology influences, shapes and determines human behaviour controverted the reliance of the humanities on social dynamics and the interpretation of agency as a distinctive human quality.

The 'engineer sociologists' are at the heart of the process of translation/mediation, the back and forth movement between the different parts that contribute to the shaping of knowledge, objects, behaviours, beliefs, etc. In other words they are the ones able to simultaneously converse with the scientific, technological and social and lead the process of innovation. This process of bringing together different elements and partners from a multitude of spheres is called 'heterogeneous engineering'.

ANT exposes the fragility of 'scientifically-proven' facts by pointing at the network of relations that shape the dynamics of production turning every object into a composite of relationships, a network within a network.²⁴ It dispenses of dualistic frameworks of interpretation for an impartial engagement with the heterogeneous networks (of science and technology and the world they inhabit)

24 I see a close resemblance to Leibnitz's concept of the Monad and its influence on the development of Deleuze's rhizomatic system, Rheinberger's 'epistemic thing' and modes of punctualisation.

through which objects and relations are constantly transformed and redefined. The levelling of agency that actants - human and non-human elements - exercise within this relational interconnectivity and the implied epistemological (re-)ordering, is fundamental to the ANT operational framework and its applicability.

In problematizing the issue of immutable scientific facts by highlighting the mutuality of connections inherent in a network driven by the need for perpetual renovation, reinvention or reconfiguration calls for a reconceptualization of the subject-object dichotomy and the wider discourse on form and process. This wide and admittedly rather wild relativism, the openness of form and the potential for making and following an unlimited amount of connections (leading to unpredictable interpretations) have been at the centre of much of the critique received by ANT.²⁵

1.6.1 Black-boxes and punctualisation

The idea of a black-box is used by a number of academic disciplines.

²⁵ Interestingly this is the same kind of critique that multi-modal reporting and interactive documentary formats often receive from legacy media houses. Their concern is often that the content, story, 'message' or news 'item' gets lost in the form. I discuss this in the coming sections of this chapter.

ANT scholars use this term to describe the actor-network as a parcel. A computer, a car, a television (Cressman, 2009, p.6), a bank or a body (Law, 1992, p.4) – anything embodying a complex network – can be considered as a black box, thus packaging the complex assembly of socio-technological associative processes into a single unit, an opaque ‘box’. An object or an actor-network is reduced or simplified to a series of inputs and outputs. This act whereby a complex system is unified marks a node in the wider process of heterogeneous engineering. These nodes, as necessary conventions in the process of ordering, are conceptualised as acts of punctualisation.

As long as the machine works well the socio-technical network of connections that compose it remains hidden. But what if it fails? What if it breaks down? (Cressman, 2009, p.6) What if the (laws of) science and technology that we once relied on no longer perform the function they were designed for?

We can no longer trust the object - the actor-network. This assembly of “techniques, materials, thought processes and behaviour”, drawn from the institutions of science and technology has betrayed our trust. Failure puts into question our faith in these institutions and it is relatively easy to understand how this logic was used to challenge the immutability of scientific facts and mark the transition from a

sociology of science to a sociology of scientific knowledge based on a study of historical contingencies (*ibid.*).

Malfunction pushes us into a state of disbelief, a crisis of values, and this shows that the act of punctualisation carries a degree of precarity (failure, resistance and/or conflict). Acknowledging this precarity is crucial when it comes to discussing the process of ‘opening the black-box’, tracing the actor-network inside and giving it meaning or, to use the proper terminology, translate it.

1.6.2 Translation ²⁶

The power struggles within such heterogeneous systems and the difficulties of translation are famously explained in Callon’s study of how EDF (Électricité de France) sought to develop an electric car in the 1970s (Callon, 1986). EDF’s vision was that this new car (read as actor-network) would eventually be the vehicle of choice of a society that was sensitive to the threat of pollution, increasing oil prices and

²⁶ The term ‘translation’ is indicative of ANT’s grounding in post-structuralist thought and the use of literary theory to try to understand or provide a description of the world. Michel Callon, John Law, John Hassard, Bruno Latour and others attribute this directly to Michel Serres’ earlier development of the term as a challenge to the use of a meta-language in his philosophy of science.

the unsustainability of producing more internal combustion engines. In lobbying for this change EDF constructed a totalising narrative about the appeal of this new product and tried to enrol a number of key actors as collaborators including Renault.

The latter saw that this deal would only relegate them to a diminished role in car manufacturing and eventually opted out of the arrangement. The translation necessary for this 'heterogeneous engineering' process failed because the resistance by one actor could not be overcome. Renault later associated itself with Nissan and eventually the two car manufacturing giants co-produced their own electric car (new actor-network).

Translation can be defined as the associations that bridge or give meaning to the gaps between different domains and elements that make an actor-network. It shapes the various processes that bind and define the symmetrically posited technical and social worlds. It is that 'activity' in between the conditions and the strategies involved in negotiating differences.

The concept of symmetry²⁷ is fraught with difficulties related to

27 But not only – Agnosticism (impartiality between actors) and free association (no a priori distinctions). See also Callon, 1986, p.3-4.

these differences and this is evidenced in the conceptualisation of the 'translation' process. In the following paragraphs I will touch upon some of the key issues related to this concept and try to provide a condensed idea of the broad debate on the issue.

In his study of the attempts at 'domestication' or farming of scallops in St Briec Bay, France, Callon (Callon, 1986) looks at the dynamics between the parties involved. Applying 'the sociology of translation' as a method to conduct his 'study of power', he identifies four key moments or phases (that can overlap) in translation; (i) problematization, (ii) intersement, (iii) enrolment and (iv) mobilization of allies.

Callon remains cautious as to the sustainability and stability of these networks of 'representation' and warns that "To speak for others is to first silence those in whose name we speak" (*ibid.*, p.14). The potential for contestation and the rise of 'free radicals' are reminders of the temporary nature of the networking arrangements.

By recognising that power is the effect of tactics and strategies rather than a cause, by recognising the fickle nature of actor-networks characterised by disputes and resistances, John Law turns to ANT's materialism for some refuge. Retaining a fair degree of caution he

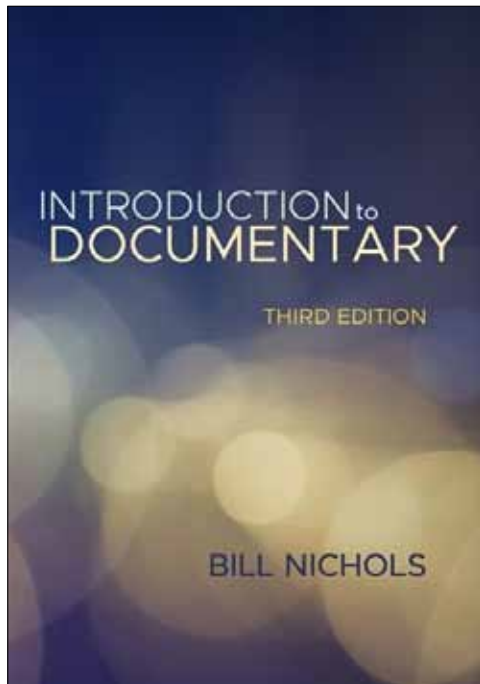
identifies five points of consideration that might yield healthier ordering strategies for developing an actor-network.

His argument is based on a consideration of (i) time and the durability of materials, (ii) space and mobility or more precisely the shifting and transmission of values, (iii) calculation and predictability of responses and reactions of the elements subjected to translation, (iv) the scope of ordering and (v) tied directly to the above is the question of a multitude of coexisting strategies that create asymmetries (centre/periphery) and that complicate the process of calculation.

1.7 Forging truths and the politics of representation

Definitions of 'documentary', clarifications and taxonomies of non-fiction storytelling abound. Amongst the most cited are the seven 'modes' that Bill Nichols' proposes in his third edition of *Introduction to documentary*; the poetic, the expository, the observational, the participatory, the reflexive, the performative and the interactive.²⁸ These seven operational modes are neither exclusive nor definitive but serve as guides for the study of films engaged in representing

²⁸ Although Nichols acknowledges interactive documentary by adding it to the six modes that he had previously described in prior editions of his book, he remains scant with information and barely discusses this mode.



lives, situations and historical events without recourse to fictional narrative devices (Nichols, 2017, p.10). The nature of the criticism levelled at Nichols' modes, as being restrictive, simplistic and inconsistent (Natusch and Hawkins, 2014, p.105), is in itself indicative of the breadth, complexity and diversity of non-fiction audio-visual productions. This is particularly true in the current context where mobile computing and social media environments have become main platforms in media consumption. The affordances provided by these new platforms have presented non-fiction storytellers with new tools with which to mediate between 'the real' and the public.²⁹

It seems to me that this diversity is making it increasingly difficult to speak about a 'documentary' genre without the support of a number of qualifiers. However definitions and taxonomies remain problematic particularly because of their historic roots in ethnographic practice as an Imperialist tool of subjection (in the form of categorization and classification). Additionally it is important to emphasise that much of the early 'documentary' material was produced under the patronage of propagandistic machines such as the British 'Empire Marketing

²⁹ I return to this evolution in documentary making later in this section.



Drifters (1929)
John Grierson

Board' (David, 1987),³⁰ the Soviet 'Kino-Pravda' (lit. trans. 'film-truth') or for large economically driven corporations like Paramount.

Interestingly, in discussing the reasons behind the fluidity of the terms defining the documentary genre Nichols focuses on the way terminology serves institutions and only engages with technological advancement tangentially. He attributes change to the "(1) institutions that support documentary production and reception, (2) the creative efforts of film-makers, (3) the lasting influence of specific films, and (4) the expectations of audiences. [These] create an evolving definition of what counts as a documentary" (Nichols, 2017, p.11).

Nichols' positioning however should not be interpreted as servile to the above-mentioned institutions. There's a fair degree of radicalism

30 Grierson's (employed by EMB) now famous description of Flaherty's *Moana* as, "Documentary, or the creative treatment of actuality, ..." in 1933, has for a very long time been the subject of debate (Kerigan and McIntyre, 2010). Particularly interesting to this research is that while working for EMB Grierson chose fishermen as subjects for his films at least three times. The first was in *Drifters* (1929) that he directed and edited himself, the second one was *Granton Trawler* (1934) which he co-directed with Edgar Anstey and the third was *Man of Aran* (1934) by Flaherty. Further to this argument, Nichols describes documentary (the expository mode) as 'an act of persuasion'. Gaudenzi, quoting Dovey and Rose, discusses this in the context of linear narratives (Gaudenzi, 2013, p.35).

in his suggestion that, “[a]lthough every institutional framework imposes limits and conventions, individual filmmakers need not accept them. The tension between established expectations and individual innovation proves a frequent source of change” (Nichols, 2017, p.13).

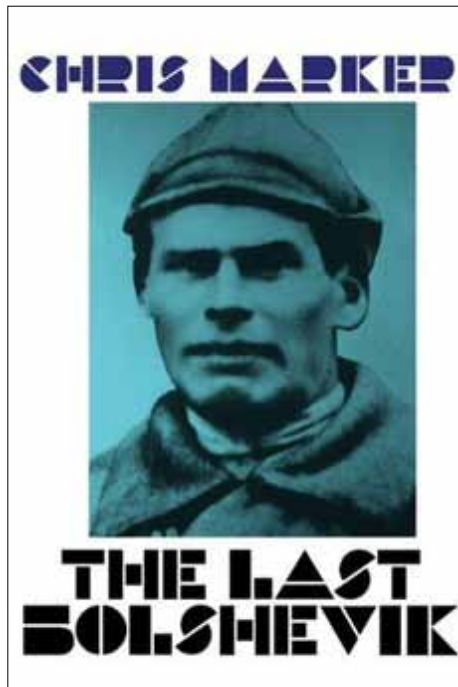
This tension has prompted me to look at documentary work as a predominantly political exercise and how content, form and distribution operate within and beyond the social fabric. I approach this by moving from a discussion of the ‘essayistic’ form of filmmaking to more contemporary practices motivated by the reading of politically committed radical thinkers and practitioners. For support I turn to seminal works in anthropology such as Marcus and Clifford’s *Writing Culture* (1986) and Hal Foster’s essay *The artist as ethnographer?* (1995) and the ‘ethnographic turn’ that ensued.

Rancière focuses on documentary cinema in at least two main texts published nearly a decade apart; *Aisthesis: scenes from the aesthetic regime of art* (2013) and *Film Fables* (2006). The prevailing argument in these writings is that the documentary is a form of fiction. His argument follows a very simple logic; documentary is a way of creating memory and memory is a form of fiction. To formulate such an argument he returns to Aristotle’s use of *muthos*, “the

“arrangement of incidents” not as a myth but a fable or fiction.” The etymology of *ingere* (fiction) “doesn’t mean “to feign” but “to forge”. Fiction is here understood as using the means of art to construct a “system” of represented actions, assembled forms, and internally coherent signs” (Rancière, 2006, p.158). This notion of construct or system is at the core of the longstanding debate on the role of the participant-observer as storyteller.

Rancière tells us that the systems forged by fiction films and documentary films are distinguished by the relationship both have with ‘the real’. While fiction tries to reproduce reality, documentary uses reality as its raw material. Keeping in mind that Rancière is talking primarily about montage, we are once again confronted by the question of how to reconcile the cutting-up and sequencing of reality with the expectations of truth synonymous with the documentary format.

I believe that we must read this as a provocation in line with the radicalism of the Aesthetic regime, the friction between ‘police’ and ‘politics’ and how this leads to and informs “an ‘aesthetics of knowledge’ [...] montages that through associations and disassociations allow us to rethink the conceptual networks that determine our impressions of what constitutes the real” (Baumbach,



2010, pp.67-68).

In *Marker and the Fiction of Memory* published in *Film Fables* (2006) Rancière uses Chris Marker's *The Last Bolshevik* (*Le tombeau d'Alexandre*, 1992)³¹ as a pretext to distinguish between different cinematic forms of fables or fiction and their relationship with memory which he qualifies as, "not the store of recollections of a particular consciousness, else the very notion of a collective memory would be devoid of sense. Memory is an orderly collection, a certain arrangement of signs, traces, and monuments" (Rancière, 2006, p.157).

The second text deals with Dziga Vertov's filmography. In *Seeing things through things* (Moscow, 1926), a scene from *Aisthesis* Rancière 'reads' through Vertov's *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926) and proceeds to analyse the author's development of a filmic language (based on the visual, the factual and the political) inscribed in the 'living whole' of Soviet life producing what he terms a 'film-thing'. His understanding of this parallels Vertov's understanding of the film as a physical composite of fragments of reality that is part of the circle of production of consumables. In other words the conception of a 'film-

31 <https://chrismarker.org/chris-marker/the-last-bolshevik-by-chris-marker/>



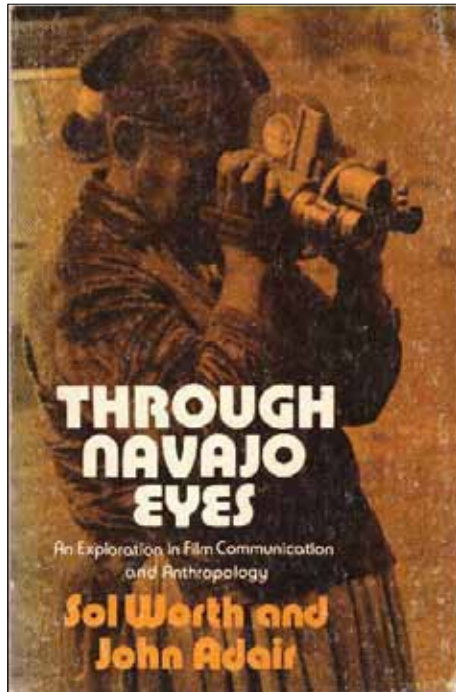
A Sixth Part of the World (1926)
movie poster

thing’ nullifies the dichotomy between art and everyday objects.³²

The documentary is thus seen as an extension of the social continuum and Rancière tells us that this frees it from conventional “affinities and verisimilitude that exert so much force on so-called fiction cinema. This gives the documentary much greater leverage to play around with the consonance and dissonance between narrative voices, or with the series of period images with different provenances and signifying power” (*ibid.*, p.161).

The political implications of this reconfiguration is particularly significant for my practice as a non-fiction story teller burdened by the awareness of what Jane M. Gaines describes as “the us/ them power differential that has characterized the work of classical ethnography from Robert Flaherty to Robert Gardner” and goes on to identify “innovative camera-object configurations” as a way “to bridge gaps in understanding” (Gaines, 1999, p.14). Essayistic films by Vertov, Marker, Rouch and others can thus be seen as a counter-response to traditional ethnographic film. The unorthodox expressive

³² Parallels can here be drawn with Rheinberger’s ‘epistemic thing’, Marcus’ multi-sited methodology and the debate on ‘the medium as message’ that follows works by the likes of Guy Debord and Adam Curtis and their critique of Globalisation and the normative role of the establishment (in the broadest sense of the word).



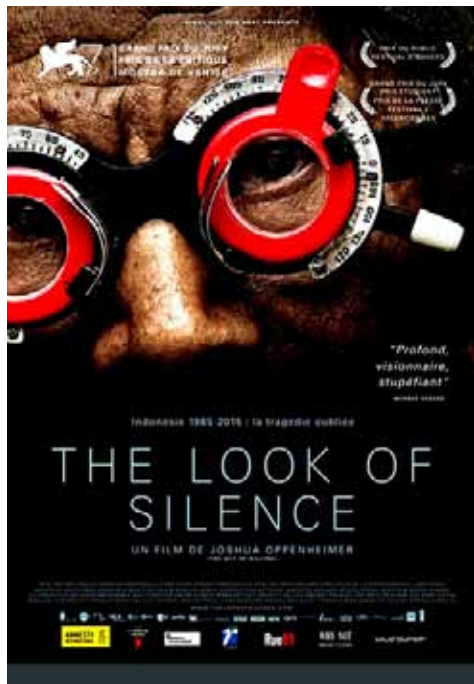
techniques used carry the mark of the Surrealists' radical commitment to "semiotic decoding with the aim of deauthenticating, and then expanding or displacing, the common categories" (Clifford, 1981, p.548).

What Clifford and Gaines are telling us is that it is a matter of syntax; the job has to be done from within the medium itself. Sharing similar concerns Collier and Collier return on the encounter and the dynamics operating between filmmaker and his/her subjects by asking, 'How can films be made from the inside out?' and cite John Adair and Sol Wirth's, *Through Navajo Eyes* (1972) where the subjects were directly involved in the filmmaking process but they are cautious in their conclusion, 'Yet it is significant that these successful experiments are rarely repeated [...] only in theory are "we" willing to let "the native" have authoritative judgment!' (Collier and Collier, 1986, p. 157)

Joshua Oppenheimer's approach to non-fiction filmmaking in *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014) where a bottom up approach favouring individual accounts over straight reporting of historical facts, might be seen in this light. Both films deal with the horrors of the Indonesian purge of Communists, leftists and ethnic Chinese in between 1965-66 where over 500,000 people were massacred.



In *The Act of Killing* Oppenheimer asks the perpetrators to re-enact their killings for the camera and gives participant-informers the task to choose the cinema style in which each would like to re-enact his account. The horrific events are thus re-imagined through beautifully crafted scenes shot in a gangster, western and musical style in which each of the perpetrators is the star performer. These scenes are inscribed within a broader narrative which sees the camera following the main characters through the whole filmmaking process.



The film's unconventional approach to documentary filmmaking – particularly, and perhaps more importantly - the whimsical treatment of genocide and the representation of the killers and the murders they committed have stirred a lot of debate. The audience is baffled (Nichols, 2013) by what it sees on screen and what it reads in these cinematic fantasies. The combination of two registers of representation, the sadistic and the entertaining, not only does it not meet the audience's realist narrative expectations but it also puts the viewers in that uncomfortable spot between the appalling and the appealing. The tension between the ethical and the aesthetic devised by Oppenheimer offer ample opportunities for discussing strategies of collaboration, audience engagement and representation through the

documentary film.³³

The debate on agency and the construction of meaning in non-fiction storytelling has found renewed impetus in recent scholarship particularly in those fields concerned with digital media and mobile computing. The affordances of new technology have allowed for multiple varieties of reconfiguring the dynamics of authorship and narrative voice. Equally important are the diversity of media that can be combined into a single 'story'. Fast paced technical innovation has also left scholars, festivals and funding bodies scrambling to catch up with practitioners experimenting with new forms of documentary making.

This wilderness in the field led to conferences like i-docs (<http://i-docs.org/>) around which grew communities of academics intent on sharpening the analytical tools for understanding better the evolution of the genre. In 2013 Sandra Gaudenzi addressed this lacuna in scholarship by shifting Nichols' previous notion of modes of

33 For further reading see Ten Brink (Ed.), 2012; Paramaditha, 2013; Schenkel, 2015.

representation to modes of interaction.³⁴ Through this repositioning she analyses the interactive documentary as an organic 'living' form, defined by the level of contribution the users have in creating the story-experience and the repositioning of the author. Advocating collaborative meaning-making processes Gaudenzi takes to task positions such as that held by Stella Bruzzi who 'sees the documentary as "a dialectical conjunction of a real space and the filmmakers that invade it" (2000, p.125 as cited by Gaudenzi, 2013, p.34). Gaudenzi's response came, partly, in the proposition of four new modes; the conversational, the hitchhiking (or hypertext) mode, the participatory mode, the experiential mode (affective) (*ibid.*, pp.39-70).

The way stories are mediated through new 'open' platforms requires a shift from the author's traditional leading voice dictating the storyline to that of facilitator.

34 Gaudenzi writes, "As in any emerging field there is a lack of definitions and taxonomies that confuses our understanding of the genre and makes the mapping of the field particularly difficult. Terminologies such as new media documentaries, web-docs, docu-games, cross-platform docs, trans-media docs, alternate realities docs, web-native docs and interactive documentaries are all used without clear understanding of their differences. But a closer look at the form shows that all these types of interactive documentaries are substantially different because they all vary in degrees of interactions, in levels of participation, in logics of interaction and in degrees of narrative control by the author" (2013, p.14).



This shift in authorship through the use of online platforms is perhaps best seen in projects like *Highrise* (2015) by Katerina Cizek “a multi-year, many-media, collaborative documentary experiment”.³⁵ Cizek who has a background in activist, community-based programs and describes herself as ‘media-agnostic’ is “interested in how the technology of media can be used as a process of social change, not just a way to make a final product of a film.” Her understanding of collaboration is nonetheless a process where roles are clearly defined, “When I work with people who have first-lived experience of an event or a phenomenon their first-lived experience has a primacy to it, but in terms of making media, I claim that expertise” (Lacey, 2016).³⁶

Documentary makers and academics have been showing a growing interest in issues of co-authorship and the challenges and opportunities that new media affordances present to non-fiction storytellers intent on challenging monolithic narratives with more complex representational models. Cizek, together with William Uricchio, has co-edited *COLLECTIVE WISDOM: Co-Creating Media within Communities, across Disciplines and with Algorithms* (2019) with the intent to “map, define, and shed light on co-creation methods within media (arts, documen-

³⁵ <http://highrise.nfb.ca>

³⁶ Sharon Lacey, *In the Making: Katerina Cizek*, 13 January 2016. <https://arts.mit.edu/in-the-making-katerina-cizek/>

tary, and journalism) and adjacent areas of knowledge (design, open-source tech, urban and community planning).”

Similar preoccupations with complex narrative structures and criticality have led Judith Aston and Stefano Odorico to initiate a discourse on the notion of ‘polyphonic documentary’ as a “multi-perspectival thinking” environment. Aston and Odorico’s argument is motivated by an ideological penchant “to help protect democratic values of diversity, openness and fair exchange.” (2020, 2018)³⁷

1.8 Multimodality, (e)motion and affective engagement

My interest in ‘interactive documentaries’ lies in the way it reframes the ‘documentary’ as an immersive form that can employ the use of a variety of media within a relational structure. In my discussion I adhere to the definition of an interactive documentary as “any project that starts with the intention to engage with the ‘real’, and that uses interactive digital technology to realise this intention.”³⁸ I explore this mode of non-fiction storytelling through the agency accorded to the ‘user’, the polyvocality inherent to ecological narrative structures and the germination of new interpretations of the documentary subject.

³⁷ See also Dovey and Rose, 2012, p.167.

³⁸ <http://i-docs.org/about-interactive-documentary-idocs/>

My point of departure is to conceive of storytelling as an 'epistemic thing' (Rheinberger, 2010), a multi-dimensional experimental space characterised by engagement and exchange. I broadly address these and other closely related issues like co-authorship, collaboration and participation through a discourse on speculative meaning-making, movement and affect as laid out in previous sections of this chapter.

Thinking about my practice as research in the strategic use of malleable forms of storytelling that can open the narrative of Maltese fishermen to fresh interpretations, I turn to a selection of installation pieces to discuss transformative itineraries. As mentioned earlier, Giuliana Bruno's notion of psycho-geographies is intimately bound to the idea of personal journeying. Playing on the shift from 'sight' to 'site', the optic to the haptic, she emphasises the correlation between space and (erratic) movement stating that, "motion, indeed, produces emotion and that, correlatively, emotion contains a movement" (Bruno, 2002, p.6).

In *Being alive: essays on movement, knowledge and description* (2011) Tim Ingold describes his work as an effort to resist closure or finitude. His ambition is;

to replace the end-directed or teleonomic conception of the

life-process with a recognition of life's capacity continually to overtake the destinations that are thrown up in its course. It is of the essence of life that it does not begin here or end there, or connect a point of origin with a final destination, but rather that it keeps on going, finding a way through the myriad of things that form, persist and break up in its currents. Life, in short, is a movement of opening, not of closure. As such, it should lie at the very heart of anthropological concern. (Ingold, 2011, pp.3-4)

Ingold expands his idea in the notion of 'wayfaring', a form of travel where the journey becomes an exploratory or inquisitive exercise that inscribes the traveller in the immanence of the world, a perpetual state of 'coming-into-being' (*ibid.* p.63), "a world that is not pre-ordained but incipient, forever on the verge of the actual" (*Ibid.*, p.69).

What Bruno and Ingold address are forms of being present in a continuum, a kind of permanent state of present-continuous that binds human and non-human actants together.

For Mieke Bal (2008) this kind of engagement is vital to the cognitive process of an audience. By navigating through a gallery space, the visitor constructs a narrative dependent on his/her own experience



Saying It, (2012)
Mieke Bal



of space and the objects on display. The sequence (of moving across a gallery/installation space) is often non-linear with multiple variables interjecting in the personal logic of connecting parts into a meaningful whole.³⁹

Curator Joanne Morra identifies Bal's collaboration with Michelle Williams Gamaker in *Saying It* (at the Freud museum, the psychoanalyst's London home, 2012) as 'site responsive' interventions using experimental multi-channel audio-visual storytelling to converse with and animate the museum space (Bal and Gamaker, 2012, p.10). The exhibition, which also features Renate Ferro's *Mining Memory*, is described as 'a mise-en-scène of the practice of psychoanalysis'.⁴⁰

Saying It presents an opportunity to raise a number of highly pertinent questions regarding the form, circulation of ideas and generation of content in contemporary audio-visual story telling. It is a creative intervention marked by a preoccupation with rethinking place and

³⁹ Ariella Azoulay also discusses the curation of *The Family of Man* 1955 exhibition (curated by Edward Steichen) in terms of a "continuum", a "dynamic installation" that allows for "other contexts-some of which the curator may have seen but others that escaped him-are created by the viewers, a result of their editing in the space" (Azoulay, in Keenan *et al.*, 2013, pp.34-36).

⁴⁰ <https://www.freud.org.uk/exhibitions/74794/saying-it>

process intended to engage the audience in a reflexive discourse about personhood. The way the space is animated or presented to the visitor determines the circumstances of the passage – these are the set terms of negotiation for the construction of a personal understanding of psychoanalytic practice.

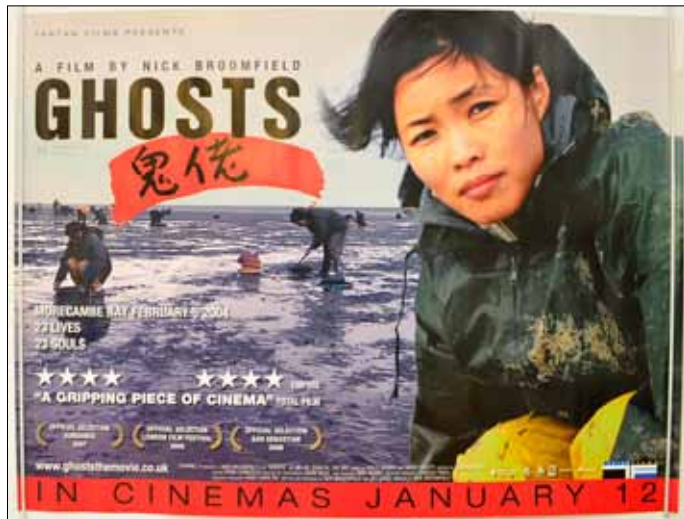
Navigating through several interjecting narratives the visitor had to negotiate with; (i) the symbolic choice of site, (given that the museum was once the home Freud escaped to from Nazi persecution, the friction between the familiar and the unfamiliar, and subsequent theories of dislocation, become more poignant), (ii) the videos and objects on display, and (iii) their arrangement in space.

Adding to this complexity is the engagement of psychoanalysis with the individual as subject submitted to an inquisitive, and at times speculative study that in itself is based on remembrance (*Mining Memory*) of real and imagined experiences (dreams) and the will to ‘confess’ (*Saying It*). For a more complete reading of this work it is also important to mention the duration of psychoanalytic therapy in relation to the unfolding of a personal narrative, in other words, a development of the self as a reflexive process in time.

Isaac Julien’s *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010, MOMA, NY) specifically



Ten Thousand Waves (2010)
Isaac Julien



Ghosts (2006)
Directed by Nick Broomfield

re-designed for MOMA⁴¹, brings to the fore a contemporary tragedy through an immersive audio-visual experience. The death of 21 Chinese cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay,⁴² North West England in 2004 is narrated through a nine-channel sound and film installation comprising of a number of connected 'sections' over multiple floors.

The artist collaborated with other filmmakers and composers to weave Chinese myth, classic and contemporary Chinese cinema, historical documentary footage of the mass rallies from the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), 'actual' rescue footage and emergency call recordings from the day of the accident, poetry, sounds and fusion music (Eastern and Western) into a fragmented non-linear narrative that goes beyond the tragedy in Morecambe.

Although the installation is contained within a very specific site in the museum space, the dynamic arrangement of the installation denies the audience a privileged static point of view and Julien strategically uses displacement as a tool of engagement on both the visual and aural level. The varying intensities of the soundscapes ranging from the mechanical sound of the rescue helicopter's rotor to the ebb and

41 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IM32TL7VnOw>

42 This was also the subject of a 2006 docu-drama film called *Ghosts* by Nick Broomfield who called his style of using non-actors to work to perform according to scripted scenes 'direct cinema'.

flow of water complement the juxtaposition of contrasting images ranging from highly sophisticated cinematography to grainy archival and amateur footage. The tension created by these varying (at times jarring) psycho-spatial elements require that the audience moves around not only physically but that it also travels and discovers meaningful 'lines of flight' across different historical, cultural and social realities/imaginaries. In *Ten Thousand Waves* dislocation places the audience in a meta-space of reflexive mobility akin to the experience of migrants in a globalised world. This tension catalyses the necessary emotional and affective response for a reflexive engagement with-in non-linear narratives.

Livesey elaborates further on the fragmentary composition of Julien's work as key to its transformative haptic experience by citing Réda Bensmaïa's understanding of essayistic structure as, a "genre of self-generation," reflective in the sense that it "demands that the reader change from simple consumer to producer" (Livesey, 2014, p.30). Michaela Quadraro frames Julien's earlier *Radioactive* (2004) installation within the discourse Laura U. Marks developed around the senses and affect under the notion of 'haptic visuality'. She writes, "The haptic space of the audiovisual installation requires the viewer to work to constitute the image and to expand its meaning, because there is not a narration that has to be followed" (Quadraro, in Karatzogianni

and Kuntsman (Eds.), 2012, p.237).

Julien, as also Bal, Gamaker and Ferro are constructing unbounded multi-layered interfaces where the itinerant visitor can engage with fluid and complex constructions of identities. Elizabeth Edwards identifies similar qualities in discussing 'the metaphor of travel' through works such as Mohini Chandra's *Travels in a New World* (1997)⁴³ where the spatio-temporal displacement (on both a literal and symbolic level) "erodes the rigidity of boundaries and perhaps points to social and cultural identity in terms of an intricate amalgam rather than an absolute or essentialist notion of 'identity'" (Edwards in Schneider and Wright (Eds.), 2006, p.147, pp.152-153).

This 'amalgam', like Fabre's conception of the Mediterranean as a palimpsest of stories, is shaped by an accumulative economy that has several counterparts in the history of artistic production and display. Museums, places of worship and private dwellings are perhaps the first 'exhibition' spaces as containers that come to mind. Parallel to, or within, these 'collections' are several other small-scale exemplars ranging from personal diaries or family albums to the cabinet of curiosities in the 16th century and its development in various guises

43 <http://www.mohinichandra.com/new-gallery-2/enkhhw5es00v-vogxydoi2upvjtevn1>



Mnemosyne Atlas (1920s)
Aby Warburg

in subsequent periods (Cooke and Wollen (Eds.), 1995). Since the beginning of the 20th century artists have sought to re-establish a direct rapport with everyday objects by readapting the form of the 'cabinet' producing some notable examples from Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1920s) to Duchamp's *Boite-en-valise* (1935-41) to Richter's *Atlas Mikromega* (1968) right up to Dina Kelberman's *I'm Google* (2010) (Cole, 2014; Richter, 2012; see also Merewether, 2006).

Le Musée sentimental, (1977) Daniel Spoerri's collaborative work with historian Marie-Louise Plessen, brings mundane objects in museum vitrines, eye-level displays and conventional lighting and combines them to 'keywords'. This juxtaposition of text, mundane object and institutional space strikes at the heart of conventional museological narratives and to a certain degree carries echoes from Andre Malraux's *The Imaginary Museum* (1947) and his critique of museums as spaces of alienation and entombment. Under the guise of artistic practice, Spoerri adopts an ethnographic methodology "to rebuild a microcosm based on the memory of a community. [...] Where many artists try desperately to create meaning for a community out of the invisible or the supernatural, Spoerri simply juxtaposed objects that already possessed communal meaning and power, given by history and not the individual decision of an artist" (Martin in Cooke and Wollen (Eds.), 1995, p.67).



Le musee sentimental (1977) detail,
Daniel Spoerri

It is interesting to consider Spoerri's 'rebuilding' as a critique of commodification and value in the light of the idea of 'artefactual fictions' and the relation with stratification and archaeological 'digs' as presented by Alexandra Warwick. Following Elliot Colla's use of the term 'artefactual' and the way he describes objects as active elements within "a sprawling network of agents and actants",⁴⁴ Warwick underlines how the objects themselves break from the stratification of the archaeological site (transposed in the halls and vitrines of the museum) to re-claim a presence in the here and now. Warwick's description of 'artefactual fictions' seems to me to be rooted in the materiality of the object itself (as an outcome of a making process but also as a commodity, be that functional, symbolic or other) (Warwick, 2012, pp.86-88).

I take Warwick's discourse as a provocation to reflect on my own research as a process of digging and moving across different temporalities, excavating and possibly deracinating 'objects' of memory and emotion. My understanding is that Warwick and Colla are making a case for rupturing hierarchical narratives as a way for artefacts to reclaim new possible meanings.

⁴⁴ This kind of terminology in itself is already indicative of the author's familiarity with ANT.

1.9 New documentary formats: agency and interactivity

The affordances of new media platforms have proved providential in that they allow storytellers to explore and exploit an unprecedented array of creative interfaces and distribution channels. Faster internet speeds (higher bandwidth), broader connectivity and the ever-growing presence of mobile computing have contributed significantly to the lure that online platforms have for audio-visual storytellers. From a purely pragmatic standpoint inscribing documentary practice in the broader social media environment allows for faster reach of specific audiences and online communities and also allows for smaller players (independent, non-industry backed or with restricted budgets) to produce, publish and promote their projects. I would argue that in addition to the potential to further a project's reach and ease of distribution storytellers are attracted to the idea of being part of this new wave of innovation in the history of the form itself. Moreover, one should also not overlook the mere pleasure of experimentation and creation for their own sake.

The growth of digital storytelling has also been reflected in the way institutions have responded to the demands of the new form. While funding bodies seem to be catching up with the definition of what constitutes an 'interactive' or digital format documentary, major

film festivals (IDFA, Sundance, Sheffield Doc/Fest, ...), photography contests (the World Press Photo), the Webby awards (webbyawards.com), and other media 'institutions' have included categories to accommodate the new formats (Dovey in Aston, Gaudenzi and Rose (Eds.), 2018, pp.273-274; Gaudenzi, 2013, p.28).

Academia also contributed to the development of the new form not only with dedicated conferences like i-Docs, but also with conferences, research networks and the development of subject areas including digital humanities.

In this regard, as a researcher engaging with new ethnographic methods and multi-media documentary practice I was intrigued by the kind of reception that digital storytelling received in conferences and festivals like the Royal Anthropological Institute Film Festival (Bristol). In 2017, presenting during the festival's 15th edition, Judith Aston presented a talk titled *What is Interactive Documentary and why does it matter?*.⁴⁵ Whilst, as I have shown earlier in this chapter, the field of anthropology and ethnographic practice is exploring new ways of recording and interpreting knowledge from the field, members in the audience expressed a fair degree of scepticism as to the usefulness

45 Aston also presented a talk with Paolo Favero on *Interactive Documentary and Ethnographic Film*.



Judith Aston,
What is Interactive Documentary and why does it matter?, 2017, Bristol.
(my photo)

of digital interactive interfaces to their work. Although in the following paragraphs I hint at what might be some of the reasons behind this scepticism the title itself of Aston's talk betrays a lingering need to explain and convince even if (or possibly even because of) multimedia and the digital form had already been subject of interest to respected anthropologists like Peter Biella and Marcus Banks⁴⁶ (Vannini, 2020; Barkin and Stone, 2004, 2000).

Legacy media houses were also slow on the uptake. Following the digital revolution, publishing and broadcast mass media struggled to re-invent and convert themselves to the creative malleability of form favoured by new digital interfaces and the networking of information which they saw as a disruption to their traditional linear way of narrating a story. In discussing the way new media force us to think anew the structures within which we construct meaning Dovey and Rose acknowledge, "The challenge in these marriages of mass media form and rhizomatic network is to find new ways of shaping attention into a coherent experience" (Dovey and Rose, 2012; see also

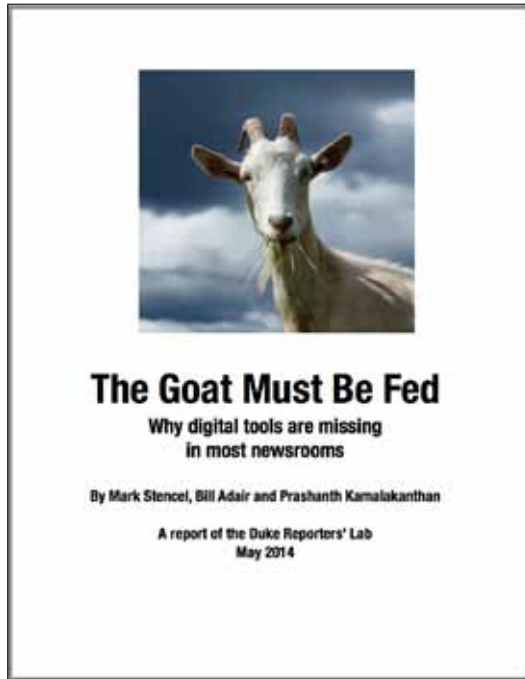
46 *The Routledge International Handbook of Ethnographic Film and Video*, Vannini (Ed.), 2020 includes numerous essays about new developments in the field including one by Peter Biella titled *Interactive media* (*ibid.*, p.137) and another essay on *Oral history, visual ethnography, and the interactive documentary* by Kathleen M. Ryan and David Staton (*ibid.*, p.95).



Forceville, 2017).⁴⁷ Further to this hesitation or resistance to open and adapt the journalistic form to the affordances of new media platforms Dovey states that “projects struggle to find champions or budgets, expertise is patchy, unreliable and inconsistent” (Dovey, in Aston, Gaudenzi and Rose (Eds.), 2018, p.274).

The MIT Open Documentary Lab (OpenDocLab) report (Uricchio (Ed.), 2012) for the MacArthur Foundation, *Mapping the intersection of two cultures: Interactive Documentary and digital journalism* was commissioned to study the implications of the ‘disruptive’ effect of digital media on the operations of legacy news organisations and the necessity to experiment with new formats and engage in an active learning process to revise centralised, time-honoured media standards and established dynamics of exchange.

The report describes how new social media platforms, “an ecosystem characterized by fragmentation and plenty”, have complicated “the familiar authoritative and mono-directional renderings of events to which we’ve grown accustomed by encouraging users to explore news environments and even collaborate in their construction”. The report also attempts to sketch the kind of impact that user activity can have
47 “Indeed, how can one keep a coherent narrative or any other development trajectory through the material if it keeps changing?” (Manovich, 2000, p.178)



on the telling of a story by identifying three areas; users can i. frame and form (co-creators), ii. add content, iii. spread the project socially (*ibid.*, pp.11-12, 33-37).

The OpenDocLab/McArthur report and *the Goat must be fed* report (the Duke Reporters' Lab, 2014) underline the necessary infrastructural and cultural changes which big and small media houses alike (even if, understandably, the latter are more likely to cite budgetary constraints and limited personnel to justify a slower response) need to undergo to adapt to the new requirements of the digital ecosystem.

Further to these challenges of adaptation there is a very real concern with development and the coherence of the story. This is clearly spelled out in the OpenDocLab's discussion of the level of engagement the users have with a story, described in terms of posture, 'lean forward/sit back';

This shift in posture strikes at the core of long-established values such as authority (whose knowledge and judgment matter?), accuracy (who is responsible for checking facts and ensuring balance and context?), coherence (which makes more sense: a well crafted story or an information

environment in which the user can meander?), and intersubjectivity (which has greater credibility and impact: a report shared among many or multiple personalized and potentially different reports?). Also, the level of audience activity implied by 'lean forward' runs contrary to long-held assumptions regarding the audience, too often seen as passive and in need of guidance. Organizations, like their audiences, are bound together in a mutually-defining cultural relationship. And redefinition is now in the air. (Uricchio, 2012, p29; see also p.18)⁴⁸

Affective engagement as a result of the relational sprawl and the operational dynamics that characterise social media (which also correspond to multi-sited ethnographic methodologies) produce a form of capital. Referring to the work of Manning's *SenseLab*, Christof Brunner explores this capital not as a thing but as a multiplicity of relational movements that resonate with and amplify each other forming "a collective act", "*an ecology of relation*" (emphasis in original), "a collective process of activation", movement, a "becoming-with". Brunner writes, "Knowledge-production as a collective act brings the question of *how* such knowledge might occur (as well as

48 I explore these relations further in the next chapter when I discuss Plummer's notion of "narrative power".



East by West (2002)
Johannes Birringer, Sher Doruff, Orm Finnendahl

for whom and where) back to the relational nexus of experience. Thus knowing might mean feeling, having a relation, or moving-with.” (Brunner, 2015, p.12, emphasis in original).⁴⁹

Brunner’s analysis of interactive media is entrenched in a discourse on rupture and transversality as methods of generating affective engagement. He writes,

In their mutual composing, [bodies and technologies] cracks and ruptures in the smooth continuation of the audio-visual provide the potential for active insertion and participation. [...] Instead of merely modulating possibilities of combination through digital technologies, the multiplicity of potential directions of how a next-situation might arise renders them as operational tools. Their potential lies in revealing experience’s constitution by means of a movement-across. (*ibid.*, pp.87-88)⁵⁰

49 Brunner’s concept of resonance and amplification is rooted in a much wider discourse on the formative (effect-affect) potential of transversality and movement.

50 Sher Doruff’s performance work is an apt reference here (Doruff and Murphie, 2012).

Echoing the *SenseLab*'s idea of affective contagion, Sarah Ahmed introduces the notion of affective economy to describe the circulation and generation of emotions in online communities. Focusing on cultural politics she writes, "emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity but is produced as an effect of its circulation". Emotions accumulate strength as they move between subjects and texts, and are "not contained within the contours of a subject" (Karatzogianni and Kuntsman, (Eds.), 2012, pp.45–46).

Adi Kuntsman's formulates the concept of reverberation contrasting it with "that of 'representation', 'narration' or 'impact' – [reverberation] invites us to think not only about the movement of emotions and feelings in and out of cyberspace, through bodies, psyches, texts and machines, but also about the multiplicity of effects such movement might entail." Although I find Kuntsman's understanding of 'representation', 'narration' and 'impact' rather limiting, the concept of reverberation is seducing particularly because it, "allows us not only to follow the circulation of texts and feelings, but also to trace and open up processes of change, resistance or reconciliation, in the face of affective economies [referring to Sarah Ahmed]" (*ibid.*, p.2).

As a creative audio-visual practitioner I find the use of terms such

as resonance and reverberation particularly intriguing particularly when I think about the materiality – and subsequently the quality and degree of public engagement - of my time-based pieces. In the following chapters I will look at how the work I produced as a consequence of my collaborative fieldwork experience attends to sensory perception. Reflecting on my own emplaced, situated-learner experience I try to explain how I conceived of my works as multimedia sensescapes that function as sites for the public to empathise with Maltese fishermen.

FRAMING

PART TWO

Introduction

Juan Salazar's (Juhasz and Lebow (Eds.), 2015, p.13) description of documentary making as "a creative treatment of possibilities" articulates better the kind of intertextuality involved in the ethnographic process as documentary making that I subscribe to than Grierson's "the creative treatment of actuality". The reorientation from the actual to the possible is significant because it marries the experiential to the experimental. By consequence it forces me as artist-ethnographer to keep an open informal methodology that is able to respond and address - rather than encumber and confine - the

evolving conditions and relationships on the ground/with the subject.

Over the years of this research my approach to situated learning developed in response to a growing awareness of *my own* Mediterranean identity. Acknowledging this point of convergence between the fishermen's lives and mine is important.

It is through this shared condition of Mediterraneity that I think of the representation of identities and critically engage with embodied audio-visual storytelling practices to produce ethnographic insights into the lives of Maltese fishermen. This reflexive process led me to recognise the limitations of photographic documentary conventions and pushed me to adopt a more speculative approach to the way I employ my audio-visual recording skills and tools during both my fieldwork and the production of my multimodal stories that followed.

In the following pages I return to the epistemological and ontological positioning outlined in the first part of this thesis to analyse and critically evaluate the key aspects in the development of my fieldwork experience. My consideration of fieldwork is based on phenomenological and materialistic approaches to emplaced research, and notions of agency (or performativity) and power. Ken Plummer articulates this as narrative power describing it as, "who gets routinely

heard and who does not” (Plummer, 2018, p.477).

I examine how, in my commitment towards countering metanarratives of Mediterranean identities, I engage with interdisciplinary research methods to bring to the fore the multidimensional relational aspects that characterised my emplacement with Maltese fishermen. Core to my practice are considerations of the archival and the ‘palimpsestic’ as malleable models for developing engaging and reflexive multi-modal storytelling formats that favour multiplicity, transversal journeying across the story and, most importantly, polyvocality.

From a phenomenological perspective Sarah Pink’s proposal for multisensory approaches to ethnography seems to me to provide the most versatile⁵¹ and comprehensive approach to translating and communicating research experience.

Pink proposes, “an emplaced ethnography that attends to the question of experience by accounting for the relationships between bodies, minds and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment” (Pink, 2009, p.25). She goes on to underline the need for ethnographers to engage in self-reflexivity and explore how their own emplacement contributes to the circulation of emotions in the field. This reflexivity

⁵¹ Pink talks about project-specific methods (Pink, 2011, p.443).

needs to be sensitive to the specific semiotic systems attached to the form in which the experience is recorded and communicated (Pink, 2011, p.270).

In exploring the idea of the field as a plurality of interconnected semiotic systems Ben Highmore's expansion on Raymond William's concept of 'structures of feeling' seems to echo Pink's preoccupation with not only the body but also the world that it inhabits and constructs. Highmore writes,

By reminding ourselves that 'feeling' is related to a world of touch, to a sensual world that is fabricated out of wood, steel, denim, crushed-velvet and tarmac, and that 'taste' is connected to a world that is ingested, that triggers olfactory and gustatory sensations, I hope to push social and cultural history towards an attention to changes in the hum-drum material world of carpets and curries, beanbags and bean sprouts. (Highmore, 2016, p.145)

Highmore served me to bridge sensory epistemologies as lived experiences with reflections on labour and networks of production and consumption that not only concerned the fishing industry but also

the artistic and academic 'markets' in which I operated. This led me to think about the dynamics of commodification and the way knowledge is mediated. Highmore's re-interpretation of structures of feelings also led me to think anew the import ANT's notion of heterogeneous engineering had to my research process and the applicability of multi-sited ethnography to my practice.

What binds the above methodological approaches together is the way they address methods of representation as parts of an on-going 'ordering' process. Understanding the socio-cultural as a fluid space where the relationship between the prosaic and the poetic is interpreted through the way the individual (researcher and/or subject) inhabits that spatio-temporality.

Inhabiting a fluid space, where meaning is multi-layered and speculative, resonates with my experience of fieldwork with fishermen. As I will proceed to show there are few hard and fast rules or facts that apply to a fisherman's life and work environment. The position that I take through this thesis is that my storytelling is a reflective exercise on my own sustained engagement and experimentation with the world surrounding the *Joan of Arc* and the people whose identities are bound to its existence.



My interpretation of the research experience, practice and making draws on the fragmentary and the inherent discourse on perception and memory. Whilst I expand on this in later chapters, here I note ways in which inconsistencies, time lapses, unintelligible remarks, interruptions, repetition and the many other 'qualities' that punctuate lived experience are strategically adopted into my storytelling.

Dynamic non-linear structures of storytelling also led me to the use of 'first-person' navigation as afforded by new media platforms. This meant that I re-evaluated my collaboration with the fishermen and their families. The potential for co-creation and different forms of online distribution (where the project or parts of it gain a life of their own independent of my original project) led me to explore a number of other questions. Who and/or what were the subjects/public I'm working with? And, more importantly, what kind of agency could they have in the storytelling process?

The collaborative-immersive practice that expanded my ethnographic approach rewarded me with an abundance of first hand experiences, audio-visual recordings and objects from the field. Over a seven-year period I made new friendships and built a network of key informants. I have also accumulated a vast amount of interrelated assets (including family videos and photographs, writings, newspaper

clippings amongst other objects) that presented a number of challenges to my practice. As an audio-visual artist-researcher I am primarily concerned with understanding the connections that hold my 'collection' together and secondly, with the organisation and (re-) presentation of these fragments as an expression of the knowledge gathered from the field. I engage with discourses on the archival as a meaning-making journeying process through multi-layered structures that reflects the immersive experience(s) of my fieldwork. In other words, I seek to draw the public in the same reflexive process that characterised my exploratory passages through these archives.

The archives I deal with include the extensive diaries/log-books left by il-Glawd, the family photo albums and VHS tapes as well as my own audio-visual body of work. These constitute the material capital, the tangible assets collected during this five-year period. However, there are other - intangible - 'archives' (of memories, or experiences, or feelings) that have shaped my research process in narrative construction. The experience of being at sea, being on a boat, working side-by-side with fishermen is another form of personal archive. As I will show in the coming chapter, all these objects and experiences allow me to tap into the experience that the men have of the sea, their skills-set(s), their relationship to shore and the (is)land, the familial and social ties. Learning how to 'read into' these archives has required

extended periods of relationship-building through immersion, familiarisation and bonding with my subjects.

What follows is thus a critical analysis of these developments as 'archives' that extend over a number of different timelines and of different durations. My basic understanding of archive is thus rooted in the notion of memory as the perpetuation of instances through an accretive and associative process. This has led me to rethink the expressive virtues and limitations of the structures and forms I employ to mediate my lived experience of fishermen and the conditions in which they live and work.

2.1 Possible ethnographies

Throughout the last decades of the twentieth century the anthropological community went through a soul-searching exercise to redeem itself from how it imposed its own – white-male-bourgeois-civilising - narrative stereotypes and complexes onto the 'Other' as the subject of study. Equally important was the way reflexivity led to the understanding that the conventional tools and modus operandi of the field worker was limiting if not an outright hindrance to the scope of ethnographic study. Similar realisations and revisions of practice took

place across the social sciences.

Whilst the global political environment in the 80s was dominated by the Thatcher-Raegan years, Mikhail Gorbachev and the fall of the iron curtain, the years of the Iran-Iraq war, the war in Lebanon, the Falklands, the apartheid in South Africa and the devastating great famine in Ethiopia, social theorists were debating identity constructs vis-à-vis notions of alterity and 'difference'. A host of authors attacked the power dynamics of colonialist rule and the dehumanising effect of subjugation. Frantz Fanon's *The wretched of the world* (1961), Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Stuart Hall's writings on cultural identities were amongst those who set in motion a whole discourse attacking the delimitations of a homogenising Eurocentric view of the world. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha condemned the reductionism of essentialist discourses on identity and advocated for a more heterogeneous understanding of identity⁵² (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (Eds.), 2002; Spivak, 2006; Hall, 2017).

52 Post-colonialist theorists were not the only ones concerned with the construction of identities and issues of representation. Feminist authors like Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway also contributed immensely to changing attitudes in the social sciences in the 80s. This led to a surge of sympathetic scholarship and artistic work which swayed cultural critique towards a more leftist, reactionary position.

To such a politically charged cultural milieu the art world reimagined itself as a socially engaged activist body. Artists began to not only embrace the cause for justice and equality but also to identify with blue-collar workers, non-white communities, LGBTQ identifying persons and other minority groups. The legitimacy of the artistic expression was measured against the kind of proximity, physical or otherwise, s/he or they had to the site where social (racial, sexual, economic, ...) asymmetries were most evident. Perceptions of authenticity, truth or realness came in the shape of the oppressed, the emarginated, the sick, the destitute and the suffering subject as embodied by the artist.

In *The Artist as an ethnographer?* (1995) and in *The return of the real* (1996) Hal Foster revisits Walter Benjamin's *The author as producer* (1934) to call out the artists' self-posturing as agents of social change, resistance and reform whilst also contributing to the "bourgeois institution of autonomous art, its exclusionary definitions of art, audience, identity" (1995, p.302). Foster attacks artists' affected relationship to productivist and primitivist fantasies and points at the problems that arise from "the automatic coding of apparent difference as manifest identity and of otherness as outsidership. [sic] This coding has long enabled a cultural politics of *marginality*" (1995, p.303, emphasis in original).

Key to Foster's argument about the artist as ethnographer is the "siting of political truth in a projected alterity" (*ibid.*, p.304). This preoccupation was not new to anthropologists struggling with issues of representation and the spatio-temporal distancing that are created when the researcher projects his/her own ideas of the subject onto the subject or the field itself. More importantly is the way Foster ties this idea of projection to what he calls "ethnographic self-fashioning" (*ibid.*) and how he traces its roots in the way people like James Clifford (*Writing Culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography* with George Marcus (1986), and *On Ethnographic Surrealism*, 1981) looked at creative strategies of production as possible new critical models for practicing anthropology. This gave rise to a certain "artist-envy" amongst 'progressive' anthropologists preoccupied with increasing the discipline's reflexive abilities. It also paralleled a kind of reverse envy from the part of the artists who sought validation or legitimation by engaging with the critical discourses about the representation of the 'Other' and appropriating well-established practices for social engagement prevalent in anthropology.

Foster's doubts about the marriage between artistic production and ethnographic practice was criticised mainly for his focus on outsidership and othering whilst ignoring other aspects of the

ethnographic process – the way artists relate to their subjects and engage their publics – employed in artistic production (Marcus, 2010; Rutten, van. Dienderen and Soetaert, 2013; Siegenthaler, 2013). The anxiety Foster expresses towards the possibility of using creative methods to examine the social and produce new knowledge is somewhat anachronistic. This is evident in the way it fails to recognize the role of the collaborators facilitating the researcher's work in the field but also in the way it echoes anthropology's long and complex relationship with the use of audio-visual tools in the field and the championing of the written academic account as the ultimate 'acceptable' form.

Writing about the researcher's recruitment of a core team of informants and facilitators during fieldwork Kiven Strohm writes that,

[t]he trouble is that this collaborative relationship has habitually been expunged in the ensuing ethnographic text—Malinowski's oeuvre being the favourite example—leading to the false and misleading impression that the ethnographic subject is passive and anthropological knowledge a mere matter of data collection. (Strohm, 2015, p.98)

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George E Marcus' formulation of a multi-sited ethnography counters the kind of silencing which Strohm so succinctly warns against. Instead of reducing the field to a place devoid of human experience, activity and interaction Marcus suggests "constructing fieldwork as a social symbolic imaginary with certain posited relations among things, people, events, places and cultural artifacts, and a literally multi-sited itinerary as a field of movement emerges in the construction of such an imaginary" (Marcus, 2010, pp.267-268).

2.2 The Ethnographic society has arrived

"At the century's end, the ethnographic society has arrived."
(Plummer, 1999, p.648)

It's 1999, the world population has just surpassed six billion people, the economy is booming and the European Union has introduced the Euro. Mobile phones are a new thing, a BBC business report says it's "the year of the net"⁵³ and the millennium bug is expected to cripple computerised systems. The public is torn between the promise of an interconnected world and the fickleness of technology. There's expectation and tension and public imagination is awash in apocalyptic theories and end-of-time anxieties.

53 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/574132.stm>

It's the end of the century that gave a six-billion-strong body of people the means to stay home and see, hear and talk to other people in distant lands. Ken Plummer announces the arrival of "the ethnographic society". The context of this 'arrival' is one defined by a far-reaching globalised media, interconnectivity and portable technology.

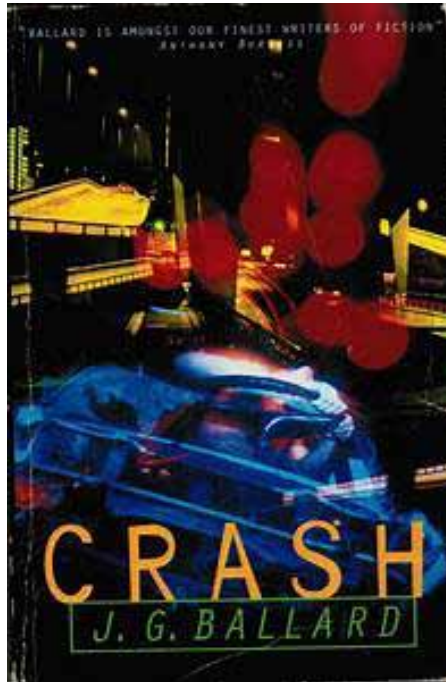
The many ways our lives are mediated and redefined by technology are concerns that Manovich explores in discussing the relationship between narrative and database structures as 'symbolic forms'. Extending Lyotard's 1979 description of a "computerised society" he provokingly suggests that if we are to think about the 'symbolic value' of database we need to critically interrogate it within a much broader socio-historical context as 'a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world.' Manovich neatly compounds his argument as follows,

Indeed, if after the death of God (Nietzsche), the end of grand Narratives of Enlightenment (Lyotard) and the arrival of the Web (Tim Berners-Lee) the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as a database. But it is also

appropriate that we would want to develops [sic] poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of this database. (Manovich, 2000, p.177)

It seems to me that Manovich and Plummer are both pointing at the way new technology necessitates a new form of critical thinking. Plummer dedicated his most recent book entirely to storytelling as a form of understanding our social relations and individual value (Plummer, 2019). As explained in the introduction to this chapter, Plummer's view of humanity is closely tied to the idea of 'narrative power'. Both Plummer and Manovich invite us to look at the structures from which we draw meaning and spur us to critically evaluate them from the perspective of how new technology shapes our understanding of the world. Theirs is an invitation to self-reflexivity. Both authors invite us to engage critically with how the proliferation of technology and the mediatization of personal experience shape our understanding of human relations and experience.

In the age of pervasive technology, ethnography has shifted from the domain of the specialised practitioner to the general public giving rise to an amateur form of ethnographic storytelling and reflexivity (which we do whether we are recording ourselves on video camera or whether we are watching a reality television show).



This popularisation of the ethnographic raises a number of issues particularly in terms of siting the ethnography, veracity and the breadth of influences shaping new 'social symbolic imaginaries' as described by Marcus.⁵⁴

J.G. Ballard's opening lines in a new introduction (1995) to his 1973 novel *Crash* poignantly describe how globalisation and technological advancement shape our relationship with "an ever more ambiguous world."

Across the communications landscape move the spectres of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy. Thermo-nuclear weapons systems and soft-drink commercials coexist in an overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography.

54 I find Plummer's discourse on how the globalised mass media and networked environment has changed the practice of ethnography and the role of ethnographer rather refreshing. It is perhaps worth reminding that Plummer was writing in the wake of post-colonialist thought (Stuart Hall, Edward Said, etc) and the parallel debate on problematic representational accounts in traditional anthropology that is celebrated as the discipline's reflective turn. Plummer's discourse sits well with Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, Ranciere's emancipated spectator and McLuhan's *The medium is the message* and the critical discourse on documentary makers' use of the voice of god and pretence to sobriety.

(J.G. Ballard, 1995, introduction pages not numbered)

Expanding on this rather bleak assessment of the mid 90s Ballard describes his ambiguous world in terms of non-linear temporalities, perceived accessibility to the truth and the loss of absolute knowledge,

We live inside an enormous novel. It is now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality. (*ibid.*)

In this globalised media environment Ballard sees the author as a person who describes his experiences of the world in a very subjective manner and is therefore free from any pretence of knowledge or any form of moral obligation to the reader. Plummer on the other hand sees an opportunity for society to embark on an even broader exercise of self-reflexion in which,

Subjects, researchers, stories, feelings, bodies, selves, truths, and languages all become entwined. There is no distant, aloof, objective ethnography after all, and certainly no all-knowing, all-wise, social science ethnographer.

(Plummer, 1999, pp.643-644)

Supporting his argument for a more critical approach to institutionalised knowledge, Plummer references Rorty's suggestion to explore morality in,

good stories richly told in the public sphere [... in turn this demands] a new role: that of the ethically skilled public ethnographer whose work should be held accountable on a number of dimensions. A public who see, hear, and read ethnographies should be increasingly tuned in to the issues that such descriptions pose, and should critically challenge those that do not meet adequate criteria. (*ibid.*)⁵⁵

While Plummer seems to indirectly acknowledge the value in Ballard's championing of the artist's individualism and capacity for invention, his own call for collective criticality betrays a preoccupation with the way subjective storytelling or private ethnographies circulate across mass media platforms. Both authors point at how mass media pluralism, globalisation and the pervasiveness of mobile computing reshape our sense of self and consequently the kind of morality we embrace. Within this tension between the subjective account and

55 Plummer is reading through Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979).

public reflexivity lies the conundrum of the artist-ethnographer.

Widespread accessibility to new tools of communication and the mass indulgence with social media also mean that our sense of sociality is no longer limited to direct human-to-human interaction but is increasingly being mediated through a screen and maybe a set of earphones. The advancement of technology marks a new degree of separation, a shift in the way we engage with the real. Could the drive for interactive (*touch*) screens and immersive VR outfits be understood as a way to redress the distancing effect of technology from the sensory world? What kind of storytelling is needed in a world dominated by networked media? How has technology redefined human connections? How can this line of speculation inform my storytelling as a practice intent on construction of identities as lived experiences?

A host of experimental storytellers have tried to exploit the affordances of new media and developing technologies in their works and there's been considerable interest in the circulation of emotion and generation of affect across online platforms. How has this been reflected in artworks? To what effect have non-fiction storytellers adopted technological means to express the complexity of the world?



DigitalME (2014-2015) detail
Sandra Gaudenzi



We Feel Fine (2006) detail
Jonathan Harris

In talking about her project *DigitalME* (2014-2015) Sandra Gaudenzi says, “I have always been intrigued by the notion of the self and the digital world seemed to offer an extra layer to the complex beings that we are: a layer that we tend to ignore because it is not tangible.” In addition to this motivation she says that the design team (Mike Robbins and his colleagues at HeliosLab) were briefed to address the question: “if your DigitalME wanted to meet you, what would this encounter be like?”⁵⁶ *DigitalME* contributed not only to the discourse on the multiplicity of identity construction in the digital age but was also intended to push the user to reflect on his or her way of ‘performing’ (the self, in Butler’s sense of the word) in social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

Jonathan Harris’ *We feel fine* (2006)⁵⁷ is described as “an exploration of human emotion on a global scale.”⁵⁸ The website functions as a repository of expressions mined from the web that contain the word ‘I feel’ or ‘I am feeling’ (Kamvar and Harris, 2011; Kamvar and Kamvar, 2009). The interface is designed around an ever-growing molecular structure that morphs according to “six formal movements titled: Madness, Murmurs, Montage, Mobs, Metrics, and Mounds.” The

56 [bbc.co.uk/taster/pilots/digital-me](http://bbc.co.uk/taster/pilots/digital-me;);

heliosdesignlabs.com/work/digital-me

57 wefeelfine.org/: 2006

58 number27.org/wefeelfine



thewhalehunt.org (2007)
Jonathan Harris

project exploits the affordances of the internet to draw an emotional landscape of the world (or at least those parts of the world connected to the online network). In Harris' portfolio website the project is described as a co-authored living artwork, "It will grow and change as we grow and change, reflecting what's on our blogs, what's in our hearts, what's in our minds. We hope it makes the world seem a little smaller". I find these words intriguing not only in that the online interfaces are seen as an extension of our lives (hearts and minds) but also in the way it emphasises the social dimension of emotion drawing it from the private to public fora where users find connection through shared experiences.

Another artist who has worked extensively on the idea of landscape and emotion is Christian Nold. Working with participants from various communities, by 2009 Nold had built 'emotional maps' of over 25 different cities.⁵⁹ Participants were asked to wear devices that measure emotional reaction (Galvanic Skin Response)⁶⁰ while they were also geotagged. An extra layer of information to the

⁵⁹ christiannold.com/archives/69

⁶⁰ Jonathan Harris used wearable monitors to 'chart' his heart-beat during the nine-day production of the whale hunt (thewhalehunt.org, 2007) which he also photographed throughout even during sleep using a chronometer. This heartbeat was then replicated in a linear photographic display where a faster heartbeat rate was replicated in the frequency of images.

data collected were the comments or annotations gathered from participants about their itineraries around their cities. Nold's work is of particular interest to my project mainly because of the way he focuses experience on emplacement. In the coming chapters I will return to this idea to discuss notions of emplacement and embodiment (see also Nold, 2015, 2004; Callard, Staines and Wilkes (eds.), 2016; MacDonald, 2014).

2.3 The palimpsest: continuity and disruption

How can technology and digital interfaces, as symbolic forms of contemporary identities, inform the way I think about my storytelling? How can the digital inform the way I mediate my personal experience of fieldwork as reflexive journeying across different spheres from the prosaic and the poetic worlds of Maltese fishermen? What kind of exploratory journeying experience am I providing my public with? To what degree have the fishermen contributed to the storytelling process and how can the public negotiate relations across the different spheres of the story? Who has the power to move what, where and

how and at what times?⁶¹

The emphasis on the plural form of time alludes to the reconceptualization of duration as multi-dimensional with multiple interrelated (by association or on the strength of proximity/ juxtaposition) temporalities. In this section I explore how notions of cross-temporalities, strategies of disruption (error, resistance, omission, incoherence, etc), timelessness and repetition (return, sameness) inform and shape my experimental ethno-documentary work.

This is where I return to the concept of the palimpsest as a compendium where the record and the process of recording are but one. The palimpsest is a denatured book where the linear reading convention succumbs to the (manifestations of) times as described

61 In this I partially borrow from Plummer's reflections on the contingent conditions which determine the narrative of a story. He writes, "Ultimately, all narratives dwell perpetually in the actions of moving time-space worlds. Stories are always on the move, continually being animated through actions flowing through moments in the public labyrinth of interconnected networks" (Plummer, 2019, p400). "Contingencies shape stories. Specifically, any narrative action will depend on many changing events rotating through five key contingencies of time (when is it being told?), space (where is it being told?), others (who is telling and who is being told?), agency (why is it being told?) and media (how is it being told?)" (*ibid.*, pp.401-402).

above. The affordances and limitations of the manuscript including its original purpose and traditional habits of use are radically reconfigured. The space is liberated from hierarchical structures of meaning making and interpretation is democratised. The capacity of the text to document and express reality is tied to the transience that defines the open fragmentary form in which it (the text) belongs.

The palimpsest embodies the world-scribe-reader network as the framework through which text and accompanying signs (or vice versa) are interpreted. The authorial powers and responsibilities shift from the scribe to the reader. It is up to the latter to wonder and work through this multi-layered fabric of inscriptions, deletions and omissions to forge a truth – a conjecture of meaningful associations that can only be contingent and never conclusive. It is a multi-temporal, multi-spatial and multi-sensorial ecology of shifting values.

It is within this methodological discourse that I make my case for the archival form as an active site of association, interrogation, contestation, negotiation and transformation that engenders rather than preserves meaning. My objection to considering archives as closed deposits of classified objects stems from their past (historical) use as evidence in propping essentialist narratives and ideologies. My problem does not lie with the objects themselves. On the contrary,

my problem lies with the subjugation of (objects as porters of) knowledge to the limitations of a sterile hierarchical structure based on quantitative information. I reject authority exercised on the strength of an ordering convention that constrains rather than allows the objects to associate and signify outside the restraints of a set parameter.

Iain Chambers (2014) attacks this delimiting kind of convenience through the analogy of the Mediterranean as a fluid archive. He uses this analogy to critique conventional geo-political narratives that celebrate North European countries as modern and progressive and relegate the Mediterranean region to a political backwater. Assigning the two regions to distinct temporal frameworks this rhetoric feeds an asymmetrical metanarrative that privileges the North over the South. Building on the premise that “Modernity [is] the being and becoming of a dense network of shifting, interconnected, historical processes” Chambers challenges the North-South distinction by highlighting the complex polyvocal meeting of migratory masses that forms the Mediterranean (*ibid.*, p.13). The crisscrossing of ‘languages’ across the sea constitutes the cultural fabric that embodies the dynamics defining Modernity as a progressive time-space.

Chambers conceives the Mediterranean as a fluid archive that can



Towards the other (2011)
Mieke Bal

be construed as a methodological model based on the geo-historical specificities of the region and how it abetted the movement of people and ideas. Drawing on culture as “a terrain characterised by mobility, mutation, and métissage...” (*ibid.*, p.17) he proceeds to assimilate the region’s polyvocality (read multiplicity) with creativity’s disruptive capabilities; to cast “an oblique gaze, sustained in the excessive and errant languages of art,” (*ibid.*, p19) and create an opportunity for translation which he ties to the concept of alterity.

A parallel conceptual framework seems to guide all of Mieke Bal’s documentary practice. Identifying “migratory culture” (Bal in Juhasz and Lebow (Eds.), 2015, p.130) as the core subject of her work she advocates a collaborative approach as an ethical responsibility of the artist-ethnographer to avoid objectifying the other. Citing her piece *Towards the Other* (2011)⁶², she describes how form and content can be structured through a conjoined effort of the author and the subject. This shift necessitates that the author relinquishes his privileged position as the sole maker of the film (/installation) to what she terms as “a heterogeneous first-person plural” mode of production. (Bal, 2015, p.131) Bal’s is a conceptualization of an aesthetic based on openness and relationality that is already present in the theme of

62 <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/exhibitions/towards-the-other/towards-the-other-installation-views/>



modesofexistence.org (ongoing)
Bruno Latour

migration itself but that is also an inherent quality of the reflective qualities imparted by the “thickness” (*ibid.*, p.133) of audio-visual installations as literalized multi-layered (trans-) formations of the initial encounter(s) between the artist and his/her subjects. In other words, Bal conceives of her work as transparent malleable structures that embody the multiplicity of interconnected experiences that characterize the encounter with the other.

Bal’s interest in tracing the connections as the core of her narrative construction (rather than forcing a personal narrative on the work) is similar to Chambers’ reading of the Mediterranean as a methodological model for processing and expressing knowledge. To consolidate my argument for the creative possibilities inherent in a multi-layered interface I return to Bruno Latour’s analysis of correspondence and translation.

In *An inquiry into modes of existence: An anthropology of the Moderns* (2013)⁶³ Latour furthers his previous discourse on scientific method and the social through a critique of the rational as an obfuscating mind-set. He attributes “the opacity of the Moderns” (Latour, 2013, p.71) to how the relationship with the world is articulated and the inability to reach consensus on the conditions that determine this

63 See also <http://modesofexistence.org/>

“correspondence”.

At the root of this problem he identifies the pretence of being able to “talk straight” and hold “pure and perfect information”. In response, he proposes to replace the word-thing dichotomy as the basic method of rationalising the world with an analysis of the mediation process that holds a relational value system together.

Latour presents a pluralist ontological model of inquiry structured around fifteen categories or ‘modes of existence’. Each mode embodies a different set of values each of which also requires a separate set of interpretative keys to connect with other parts of the network-system that these modes constitute. This “overly particular or overly polemical” (*Ibid.*, p.12, his own words) method of inquiry seems rather convoluted (Delchambre and Marquis, 2013, p.569) and of little import to my practice. However, what I find intriguing is the way he conceptualises knowledge as an ecological system (a form of narrating) characterised by hiatuses and disruptions and the negotiation of passages as an ability to associate (Latour, 2013, p.41, p.81).

Furthering ANT’s preoccupation with heterogeneous networks Latour develops a discourse on form as an embodiment of the reflexive

process shaped through

a series of transformations that ensure the discovery and the maintenance of constants: continuity of access depends on discontinuities. [...] a form is what is maintained through a series of transformations. (*ibid.*, p.107)

Latour's methodological approach rests on the premise that,

the more a layer of texts is interpreted, transformed, taken up anew, stitched back together, replayed, and rewoven, each time in a different way, the more likely it is to manifest the truth it contains. (*ibid.*, p.289)

Chambers, Bal and Latour's common interest in a multi-layered narrative structure as an 'active' space for meaning-making can be read in the light of Rancière's conception of the 'film-thing' as a 'living whole' and Sandra Gaudenzi's interest in the interactive documentary as a collaborative endeavour that gives life to an organic form of storytelling (see Part I above).

Conceptualising the Mediterranean as an organic structure characterized by transition, transversality and the speculative 'lying-in-wait' between the folds of multiple layers and/or fragments of

lives lived resonates with my fieldwork experience. The emphasis on knowledge as fragmentary, experimental and contingent has also provided me with an interesting methodological challenge for approaching my storytelling as a situated learning experience that draws on the collaborative relationship between the fishermen, the public and myself.

2.4 Fieldwork: familiarisation and immersion

My project rests on the relationships I built over the past seven years. I established relationships with individuals, families and groups of people in Marsaxlokk as the primary sources for my storytelling. It was through these personal relationships, that I developed my research practice and refined my role as emplaced learner. In this section I reflect on the early stages of my fieldwork to explore the ways in which my role evolved from that of objective observer to active participant, collaborator and friend. Throughout the years I was identified as a 'photographer' and that has stuck with me even if my relationship with the family and the rest of the community has changed considerably.

Parallel to my audio-visual recording on and around the *Joan of Arc*



Ġużeppi Abela
10th September 2014,
Marsaxlokk, Malta.



Antoine Abela
27th September 2014,
Marsaxlokk, Malta.

I also collected family photos, VHS tapes, diaries and albums. These personal objects constitute the tangible evidence from my field of study; an archive of audio-visual assets. How was I to order them? What kind of creative constructs could I produce when combining these tangible assets with my own experience of lives lived on and around a boat or a fishing village? How would my storytelling change or activate reflexivity by inscribing these material fragments and experience into complex representational structures?

It is important to underline how my relationship with Ġużeppi and Antoine,⁶⁴ and consequently with the rest of the family and community in Marsaxlokk, developed through the years. Local fishermen are accustomed to being photographed. It takes just a few minutes of sitting on the moored boat's deck and you are guaranteed to have your picture taken repeatedly by any amount of passing tourists or visitors to Marsaxlokk. In the beginning of my fieldwork I did my utmost to convince them, with actions rather than words, that I was a different kind of photographer than the ones they were used to. The novelty in my approach was in how I interacted with them – how I wanted to 'take their pictures' by first going repeatedly with them on fishing trips and secondly having lengthy conversations with them, sharing

⁶⁴ Ġużeppi is Antoine's father and the former owner of the *Joan of Arc*. He had bought the boat from his father il-Glawd. During my research Ġużeppi and Antoine were my closest collaborators.

stories, jokes, worries and grievances. Ġużeppi underlined this in a conversation we had following an interview I gave about my project to the national television station (4th March 2020). In our conversation Ġużeppi told me that *only* people who had spent extensive time with fishermen could really understand their way of life and it is only through work like mine that one gained the legitimacy to represent them. This is also a view shared and expressed publicly by the rest of the Abela family.

In January and February 2020 I gave two talks at the University of Malta and I invited the family to come along and participate in the presentation. On both occasions members of the public asked about how they viewed me and my research and their reply was that they consider me as family now. This is indeed true and they have shown their respect towards me not only by inviting me to special family occasions like new year's dinner but also, to give just one example out of many, regularly calling to check on me during the Corona virus pandemic.

This level of acceptance and process of assimilation was the result of a long process of perseverance. I was not another grab-and-go photographer and I was in no hurry to amass information. I gave them



Antoine in the foreground steering the boat out of Marsaxlokk port with Gamel, the Egyptian captain at the bow of the boat.

time to get to know me and, in return, I got to know them.

This process of relationship building was punctuated by a number of trials. (The terms and conditions of negotiating access and translation.) I had met Ġużeppi through a third party and initially he was very resistant to me going out on a fishing trip with them 'to take pictures'. A lengthy negotiation ensued. This was mainly due to my complete ignorance of the whole fishing process but also to his understanding of taking pictures in the dark. He kept repeating that I could not take pictures of the Lampara fishing method as this takes place in complete darkness and it took me quite a while to convince him that I do not use a flash gun whilst also promising that I will make my utmost to cause as little disruption as possible.

At the time I was also ignorant of the power dynamics that were directly tied to the running of the boat itself. Ġużeppi was 'retired' and technically had little say in the running of the *Joan of Arc*. Antoine was the owner of the boat but at the time an Egyptian skipper was employed to captain it and choose the crew. The captain engaged his own crew of co-nationals and Antoine was only employed as part of this crew almost out of obligation rather than choice. (This changed in 2016.) This relationship was riddled with tensions fuelled by pride, mutual mistrust and machismo often related to differing



The Joan of Arc

fishing methods and skills, knowledge of 'Maltese waters' and fishing areas. Ġużeppi's leverage in the running of the boat was based on his seniority and the kind of respect his long years of involvement with the boat commanded over the newcomers even if he was not participating in the fishing process.

How did this situation effect my practice? Ġużeppi introduced me to Antoine who in turn introduced me to Gamel (the captain) and the crew. After a brief courteous exchange I was 'told' that it was best if I stayed on the top of the bridge. This meant that I was confined to a very small space at the boat's highest point in an area usually reserved for the plastic crates used to carry fish to the fish market, industrial-sized nylon bags, buoys and any other equipment that might come in handy once out at sea. This is the place where the rocking of the boat is most felt and is completely exposed to the elements (it gets cold at night because of the humidity). The place frustrated me because I had very little space to move around, I could not stand up as I could have easily been thrown overboard (railings are only about 50cm high) and the only pictures I could take were from a relative distance at an extreme/high perspective. Eventually I learned that it was their way to test whether I suffered from seasickness but to me it was also a challenge of patience and endurance. I persevered and after a week I was let on deck and allowed some access to the bridge albeit given



constant 'advice' to "keep out of harms way".

This marked a significant turn in my work as I was able to start interacting directly with the crew. It was natural that I bonded best with Antoine with whom I could speak Maltese and the conversation could flow easily. The rest of the crew spoke an Egyptian dialect and my limited knowledge of Arabic and the specific jargon related to the trade made conversation difficult. In spite of this they soon started warming up to me. The conversations were often limited to curious questions about what I was doing or some random questions about my camera and work but also to more serious topics particularly my religious beliefs, why I have chosen not to marry and have children and why I choose to drink alcoholic beverages.

Back then I didn't make much out of these conversations except that they helped me get closer to the crew. My understanding was that conversation was a way to win trust, get closer to my subjects and subsequently get better pictures. In hindsight this initial cold pragmatic approach to my fieldwork was short-sighted – the talking and listening was much more of a complex affair than a simple meeting between men trading ideas on a boat. They were informal interviews pregnant with the socio-cultural tensions between a more conservative Muslim-Egyptian outlook of the crew and the lax

more westernised cultural upbringing that Antoine and myself had. In other words these exchanges extended beyond the subject of the conversation and contained layers of information that necessitated an expanded reading that superseded the immediacy of the textual. The dynamics at play, though grounded in the explicit subject matter, carried several implicit or tacit references. I explore the relationship between the verbal and the non-verbal in much more detail in the following chapters.

Human connection or empathy provides an interesting case for re-evaluating proximity. Empathy is not achieved solely by 'rubbing shoulders' with someone but also by a mutual will to connect, to meet the other beyond the confines of the immediate physical space (boat's deck or bridge). These connections could often be found in basic notions of home, family, well-being, religion ... but also in more mundane subjects as food and dress – universal notions that transcend physical or tangible limitations and the inherent hierarchical power structures aboard the fishing vessel.

I will return to this search for empathetic understanding repeatedly throughout my analysis mainly because it puts to the fore the relational qualities of situated learning and how it can shape the ethnographic account as a creative endeavour intent on understanding

and 'representing' the other. As I have already established above, this sense of empathy is essential to drawing meaningful connections. Christoph Brunner captures the essence of this form of affective engagement as immersive experiential learning in his phrase "being in and walking with" (Brunner, 2015, p.12).

There are other instances where proximity and the tacit take precedence in the discussion about 'learning' in the context of fishing and the identity of fishermen. First is the hierarchical organisation of the captain and the crew and secondly there is the transference of knowledge through kinship.

In its simplest form the power structure aboard the boat is determined by experience and role in the fishing process. Other important factors in this dynamic are ownership of the boat, who sells the fish and through which channels. It is according to this hierarchical structure that profits are shared. Cost of fuel, maintenance and repairs (sometimes food is also included) are deduced and then the profits are shared 50%-50%. The equation aboard the *Joan of Arc*



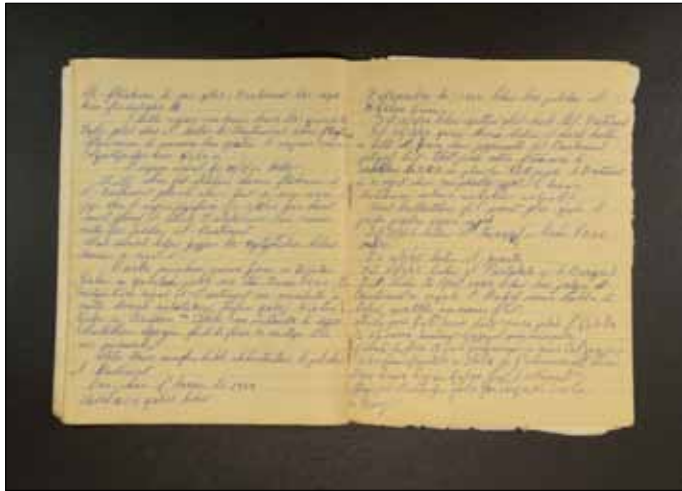
is calculated over twelve shares⁶⁵. Six go to Antoine as the owner and captain leaving six shares to be distributed among the rest of the crew. This does not (necessarily) mean that all crew members get equal shares and it is often down to experience, who joined the crew first, who engaged who (and maybe got a bit of commission), etc. There are no clear-cut rules as to how shares are distributed and these can vary from boat to boat. These varying arrangements were particularly significant in the past when boats competed in engaging the best hands and foreign crews were not involved. This is evidenced in the extensive calculations, records of payment and continuous disagreements recounted in il-Glawd's diaries and corroborated by information given by family, past crew members and collaborators.

When I joined as a crew member the Egyptian crew were given 50% while Ġużeppi who at the time had joined the boat to help Antoine in his first season as captain and myself got paid from Antoine's share (the remaining 50%). I was paid a full-share mostly out of Antoine's benevolence (traditionally someone like myself who had no experience whatsoever would be paid half a share or $\frac{3}{4}$ of a share)

⁶⁵ Il-Glawd's diaries show that in the past the shares were calculated according to a more complex equation mainly due to the fact that some individuals who were more experienced were given one share and a quarter or one share and a half. For more information about the shares system see Acheson, 1981, p.278.

while he gave the equivalent of two full shares to his father leaving him with three shares.

While my job was purely physical (pulling nets, tying and organising ropes, cleaning, etc), Ġużeppi's was exclusively based on skill and experience. As the most experienced person aboard he was responsible for the 'main lamp' which is mounted on a very small boat (6 foot boat called a *Frejgatina*) and which is the one under which all the fish gathers when all other lights from the much bigger *Joan of Arc* are switched off. Most importantly, he was the only one responsible for 'reading' the behaviour of top and bottom sea currents (speed, strength, direction, ...) as well as predict potential cross currents and weather changes (effecting the swell of the sea) that might occur during the laying of the net. This is possibly where the true skill of the Lampara fisherman lies particularly because the net needs to be laid to avoid entanglements (the release and laying of nets is done in a circle and the current is used so that the net is 'blown' open, similar to a sail in the wind). If it is laid carelessly it can get caught across-currents and will wrap around itself becoming very difficult to haul back and at worst will be thorn and lost). Ġużeppi was also attentive to any nearby ship traffic because when the net is at sea the boat is not anchored and is free to drift (this is partially countered by the pull of the tug boat) with the current throughout the whole hauling



(of the net and catch) process, which can last from approximately an hour and a half to four hours or so depending on sea conditions, wind strength and directions, problems encountered during laying of nets, size of catch amongst other matters, thus avoiding potential collisions.

2.5 Diaries and the first person account

There is something about opening old diaries. A sort of unwritten agreement that you should leaf through unhurriedly, in slow anticipation, thumb and index barely pinching the edge of the next page. There is a kind of solemnity to it. A tamed urgency commanded by latent lives in light frail sheets of paper. It is an experience in and of time, as much as it is an experience in and of substance. It is personal, intimate, compelling and beautifully sensual. (my note, 2018)

During my first two fishing seasons I approached fieldwork in a very informal way. The core of my work consisted of audio-visual recordings accompanied by lengthy conversations with Antoine and Ġużeppi. The talk would often turn to how the livelihood of small-scale fishermen took a downturn since Malta's joining the European Union. This debate on the changing politics and recent history of the



Video interview with Ġużeppi,
13th September 2014,
Marsaxlokk, Malta.

country often led to talk on the evolving lifestyle and eating habits of the Maltese and the reduced demand for specific types of smaller fish such as mackerel and sardines, in favour of steak fish including tuna, swordfish. These grievances were often, and still are, the main subject of discussion amongst the wider fishing community and family members.⁶⁶ Learning more about these changes provided me with various opportunities to further my access into the fishing community. I was one of the very few, if not the only ‘outsider’ who was willing to listen, record and try to understand what they had to say (see above).

Grasping this opportunity I set up a ‘formal’ interview with Ġużeppi (13th September 2014), who in the past had been extensively involved with the running of the fishermen’s co-operative. I could not fail to notice that his argument was often tinged with a ‘peculiar’ sense of nostalgia and loss.⁶⁷ His relationship with the past, bound as it was to his father and the *Joan of Arc*, was undoubtedly complex. During the course of this ‘on camera’ interview I asked him very general questions about his life-long experience as a fishermen and the changes that marked his experience. His replies were often rather dry and incoherent. This was partly due to the way I asked very

⁶⁶ These were the topics discussed in *Cast adrift in a sea of challenges: perspectives from Maltese fishers* (2019). See above section 1.4.

⁶⁷ For a more detailed discussion about the subject of nostalgia in anthropology see for example Ange, Berliner and Bach (Eds.), 2015.



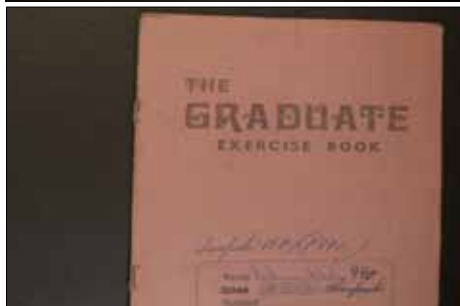
Ġużeppi (L) with his father il-Glawd (R) in the bridge of the *Joan of Arc*.

open questions but also to his amusement at being the subject of a ‘formally-set’ interview for which he felt compelled to perform to an audience. However, what stood out was how he continually returned to the relationship with his father who he repeatedly berated as a dictatorial figure. This claim was later confirmed by other members of the family and crew members who worked with him.⁶⁸

I learnt more about the root of the tensions between father and son. I consequently questioned Ġużeppi numerous times about this relationship and it was immediately evident that it was not ‘simply’ a clash of personalities. Ġużeppi is laid-back and rather reckless, by his own admission, whilst the picture he drew of his father was of a well-educated (as someone who had completed secondary school), fastidious character driven by a highly competitive attitude towards other fishermen including his own sons who he threatened to disinherit if they decided to buy their own boat and work independently.

Suspecting that the story was more nuanced I challenged Ġużeppi by telling him that the only thing I had to go by was his word and that was not enough for the purpose of my work – I needed tangible

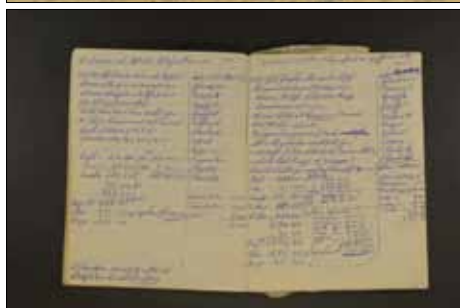
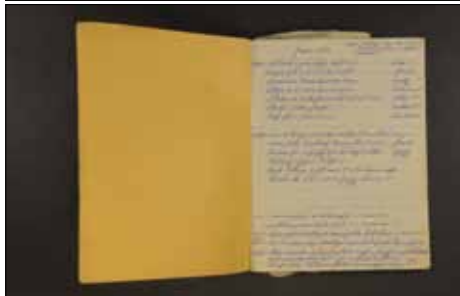
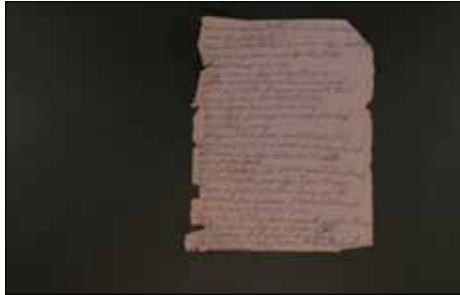
⁶⁸ Interviews with Charles Abela (28th December 2017) and Ġanni id-daħna (30th December 2017).



evidence. I brought this up again one day in late September 2015 when I was visiting the family. Turning to his wife Judith he asked her what happened to his father's 'books' and she was quick to fetch me an old exercise book.

I was gripped. Inside where entry upon entry recounting fishing trips, details of payments to crew members, specific fishing grounds, weather conditions, personal exchanges with third parties and much more. Sensing my excitement they told me how il-Glawd kept these 'books' throughout his life. I asked if there are more of them and Judith was more than happy to oblige. That night I returned home with two carton boxes full of such 'books'.

Defying all my expectations of the field this archive of exercise books, loose sheets of paper, receipts, brochures and the occasional photo, newspaper cutting, contract or letter to the editor, challenged my approach as an audio-visual storyteller.



The first person account in these ‘diaries’ spoke to me in many ways.⁶⁹ The use of the familiar voice gives the written account a sense of immediacy. It is easily relatable even if, or perhaps also because of, the vernacular and the technical are his languages of choice. In addition to this there is also a wealth of ‘data’ about catch, equipment, weather conditions, sales of fish, price of fuel and the shares system of crew salaries.

The smell of yellowing paper, the fading ink, the maturing handwriting, the consistency of the structure and the occasional breaks in form and style of writing, the appended, seemingly random, pieces of paper and the overall quirkiness of these exercise books moved me. (My note, 2018)

The visceral impact that this ‘archive’ of diaries, this narrative composite had on me necessitated a complete revision of the visual anthropological approach I had envisaged for my project. It immediately became very clear that an observational ‘fly-on-the-wall’ film/photography and the conventional detachment of the

⁶⁹ Although I do share interests with scholars in the field of microhistory particularly in the ‘ethnographic’ attention they bring to the individual, narrative, lacunae in the historical account and issues of time and cross-temporalities, I have not had the time to explore further this connection.



Antoine posted this photo of me on Facebook when I started my PhD, right after my apprenticeship.

14th August 2016.

His comment reads,

Oh our coworker Gilbert Calleja is leaving us so he can go to London for his new course well done to you you are a great guy and I wish you good luck my friend from all of us in Joan of Arc

observer from the subject was diametrically opposed to the engaging wondering experience that I got from il-Glawd's diaries. The storying process flowed across a number of interrelated registers ranging from the textual to the tactile to the tacit.

These boxes contained, or rather, constituted a degree of veracity that was beyond anything I could ever aspire to achieve as a relatively passive participant-observer and the narratives that I could have subsequently woven out of my stills and video recordings. A rethinking of my original research methodology was in order and it was evident that I had to start by repositioning myself.

2.6 Apprenticeship

In the following fishing season (2016) I swapped my cameras for fisherman's bibs and boots and went aboard as a trainee fisherman in the hope of getting an insider's experience of what 'being a fisherman' meant and eventually understand better what il-Glawd was writing about. Who was this man? What made him tick?

Notwithstanding my previous experiences aboard the boat and the lessons learnt during my familiarization period nothing prepared me for my induction as a crew member. At best my experience could



Sorting out the fish to take to the fish market.
I am in the background.
June, 2016.

be described as experiential learning. On the first trip I kept asking Antoine (the captain) to tell me what my role was and what I had to do but he kept reassuring me saying that when the time came I just had to follow his instructions. To cut a long story short, at the moment of truth I found myself lost in total darkness plunged into a fast moving dangerous environment where error can have serious consequences on the rest of the crew and equipment.

Saying that the first weeks were tough is an understatement, but having gone through this also allowed me to gain the trust and confidence of the men aboard. Being one of two persons aboard apart from Antoine who could drive a car and speak Maltese, I was often asked to assist Antoine with repairs in the engine room and with catch registration, entrusted with taking the fish to market, buy fuel, and deal with people ashore while Antoine was busy elsewhere. This helped me to significantly extend my relationship with the family, crew and the local community.⁷⁰

It's 2.30 in the afternoon and I just woke up. It's hot and there's a stifling stillness in the air. I go out on the balcony

⁷⁰ It is good to note that some of the fish we sell goes to other fishermen who use it as bait for tuna or other long line kind of fishing.

and nothing's moving. No clouds. Laundry hangs dead on the rooftops and it's too bright for my tired eyes to guess if the trees further away are moving. No hint of a breeze but with this kind of heat who knows what might come up!?

Antoine told me that the wind might reach up to force 5 from the East in the early evening but by midnight it might go down a bit. If there's not too much swell we might still be able to work. We'll see. I haven't checked windfinder.com yet.

I stink. I didn't shower this morning and went straight to bed. Now I'll have to change the bed linen too. I'm hot and tired. Why did I get myself into this? I'm grumpy. Glad that it's the full moon next week. I need a break.

We anchored twice last night. We went out early and by 8pm we were on the middle bank (s-sikka tan-nofs). There was a big red 'cloud' on the fish finder and Antoine anchored even if we were at 38 fathoms. We left Ġużeppi half a mile away at 34 fathoms. We needed to drift to shallower water to lay the net. Ġużeppi didn't feel like coming today and kept complaining looking for arguments over the radio. Eventually Antoine agreed to move and we went right up

to Hurd's bank (l-barranija) and got there late. There were already two other boats all lit up and it took us quite a while to find a good spot. We anchored and lit up immediately. Ġużeppi remained close by. There was little fish in sight but he said that it will eventually rise to the surface. I didn't get much sleep. Antoine didn't sleep much the night before and he looked knackered. Ġużeppi called me on the radio at 12.30 saying he's fed-up and kept bugging me to wake Antoine and the crew up even if the moon only set at 1.30. I woke them up at 1.

I sit at my computer and start transferring my files to the hard drive. There wasn't much swell last night and I think I shot some good footage from the frejgatina. I don't have time to see what I shot. I forgot to charge the camera batteries when I got home.

We lifted anchor and there wasn't much fish under our fish finder. There wasn't much fish under Ġużeppi either but Antoine still decided to cast the nets. We got one and a half ton. Barely worth the time and fuel. We took fifteen crates of mackerel to the pixkerija (fish market) and I was home by 10am.

*I cook, eat, shower and check emails. I check windfinder.com.
Force 5 at 9.00pm going down to 4 from the NE at midnight.*

*4pm I call Antoine. Camera batteries are not fully charged.
I'll go down to Marsaxlokk and then we'll take it from there.
(My note, 2016)*

The above is how a typical day of my fieldwork unfolds. It is a loose stringing of matter-of-fact fragments of information that reflects my surrender to the rhythm of the field and the conditions that bear on my engagement. This pragmatic account is personal and in no way provides an objective account of a Lampara fishing trip of a boat from Marsaxlokk. It is an account of my commitment to the requirements of an immersive approach and the necessity of building a rapport with the boat, people and the fishing process on a day-to-day basis. It is not an account of the fishing process itself. This distinction is important because of the emphasis it places on developing inter-personal relations as a way into the wider socio-cultural milieu of a Maltese fisherman.

A number of difficulties arise from this kind of positioning. Labour is not an abstract activity that occurs in a vacuum. One cannot really

separate the person from his trade, skills, the tools he uses and the environment in which he works. This is particularly significant in the primary sectors where livelihoods are directly tied to the harvest of natural resources, know-how is geography-specific and is often passed through kinship.

Throughout my extended period of immersion in the field, 'making sense' took the form of a lengthy course characterized by perseverance, negotiation, assimilation and collaboration. Time and time again I was forced to confront my own ignorance about the subject exposing my own prejudices and vulnerabilities. I moved, shifted and morphed and I continue doing that as I sit writing at my desk, as I revisit my recordings or as I talk to people about my project. It seems to me that my fieldwork experience led me to redefine the object of my study. Confronted by my own limitations, my initial questions as to the 'what' and 'how' I could learn about fishermen needed not only that my ethnographic approach be a reflexive exercise, but - more importantly - it also had to be extensively auto-ethnographic. In the next chapter I will try to show how reflecting on my own role and agency in the field has helped me design my works as multimedia experiential pieces through which the public can engage in an experience that is analogous to my own emplacement with Maltese fishermen in Marsaxlokk.

MAKING

PART THREE

Introduction

In this chapter I explore how I got to produce works through, and in response to, my fieldwork experience. Guided by the precepts of sensory ethnography, network theories and socio-cultural ecologies presented in the previous chapter I expand on the correlation between my fieldwork as a multi-dimensional form of situated learning and how I developed my works. Framing my practice as mediation between relations - human or otherwise – that constitute the field of study and the public, I reflect on meaning-making as a creative

endeavour that - although rooted in the social and the historical - remains bound to the individual's ability to associate signs, symbols and sensory stimuli.

Throughout this chapter I refer to the works' overarching preoccupation with engaging the public in an immersive, reflexive experience. I will show how by working through the challenges to reproduce the transformative navigational conditions that shaped my research experience - my "being in and walking with" (see Christof Brunner above) my subjects - I came to understand my practice of research and making as expressions of 'sensescapes'.

In so doing, I also elaborate on how I experimented with the affordances of multimedia platforms to expand my photographic documentary practice into an increasingly diverse and fluid form of non-linear poetic non-fiction storytelling.

To be at sea is to be lost, and to be in such a state is to be vulnerable to encounters that we do not necessarily control. History-writing conceived in this manner is not the linguistic mirror of empirical facts or an idealist teleology but rather an unfolding and incomplete composition where the fragment, the trace, are notes that register the interval

between sound and silence, and where the pulsation of writing and the restrictive politics of interpretation slide into the unexpected opening of a poetics. It is here that the nature of art insists, unexpectedly yawning open to revisit and rework the languages that contain us. (Chambers, 2004, p.425)

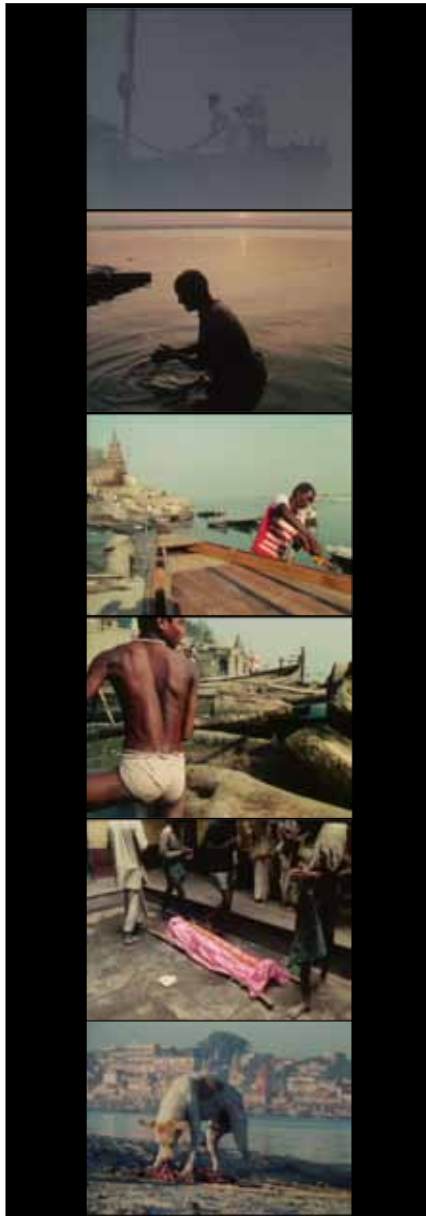
Chambers' understanding of the Mediterranean as space for a reiterative creative process and the metaphor of the Mediterranean as a palimpsest match the dynamics I experienced in my fieldwork and have served me in the design of my works. My approach is also informed by a broad array of sources ranging from a critical rethinking of the 'city symphony' genre in relation to Clifford Geertz's idea of "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) and how this idea has influenced the documentary works produced by Grierson, Gardner, and Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V erena Paravel of the Sensory Ethnography Lab, amongst others.⁷¹ Of particular interest to my practice is the way the symphony genre correlates to ideas of embodiment and emplacement in experimental documentary practice and how subsequent debates

⁷¹ For an overview of this debate see Dipesh Kharel, *Visual Ethnography, Thick Description and Cultural Representation*, (2015). For further reference see also Bartolini and Cossu, *In the field but not of the field: Clifford Geertz, Robert Bellah, and the practices of interdisciplinarity* (2020).

can inform my reflections on online platforms as “archives of feelings” that can be “objects, mediators and repositories of affect” (Karatzogianni and Kuntsman, 2012, p.6).

Emphasising reflexivity as a desirable effect of the ethnographic documentary form I reiterate my position for complex, multi-modal means of storytelling that favour openness and connectivity over finitude. In the coming pages I revisit, albeit tangentially, my reflection on ecological structures of meaning making and perceptual semiotics which I outlined in the first chapter of this thesis to assert that it is by creating a space for enquiry (through the strategic use of disruption, dissonance, etc.) that the storyteller is able to solicit an empathic response from the public and it is from this state of affect that a deeper, more meaningful engagement with the subject can be achieved. It is with this mind frame that I enter the fray in contemporary ethnographic practice to contest arguments for the primacy of the textual account over experimental audio-visual methodologies as means of drawing meaningful connections from situated learning experiences.

The tension between the need to describe and the ability to depict and evoke has produced many fruitful reflections particularly on the photographic medium and the visual. I bring attention to and problematize the import of the senses in ethnographic fieldwork. My stance is

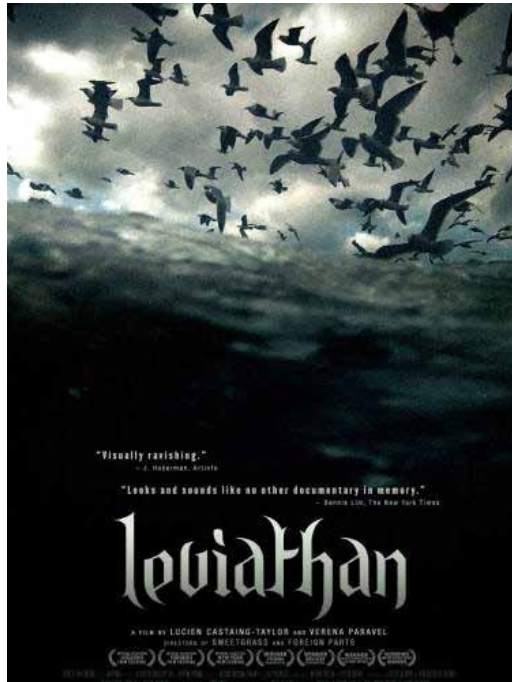


Forest of Bliss (1986)
Robert Gardner

akin to that taken by Paolo Favero who in his provocation to embrace “thin description” (Favero, 2017) challenges Kirsten Hastrup’s diminutive regard of the visual record as having a shallow capacity for rendering anthropological insight. Favero argues for the potential of mixed media storytelling structures to engender meaningful connections and proposes ways in which new technologies and the affordances of online platforms can serve as speculative “choreographies”. This not only echoes notions of the symphonic but also current debates on the polyphonic as articulated by Aston and Odorico (2020, 2018), amongst others (see section 1.7 above).

In describing John Grierson’s *Drifters* (1929) Forsyth Hardy says that the former “applied to his own film the principles of symphonic structure and dynamic editing evolved by Eisenstein and Pudovkin” (Grierson & Hardy, 1966, p.17). Over the years the term ‘symphony’ was applied to a wide variety of experimental filming and editing techniques that expanded on Eisenstein’s and Pudovkin’s idea of ‘montage’. David McDougall grasps the essence of this evolution in a very concise manner when he writes about Robert Gardner’s *Forest of bliss* (1986). McDougall writes,

If ever a film were a “city symphony,” *Forest of Bliss* is one; and if ever a film was the work of one man with a movie camera, this film certainly is. Gardner is not interested



in Vertov's self-reflexive gestures, pointing toward the materiality of film, but he is interested in integrating fragments of experience into a thematic reality—a “film truth” which can never be the truth of other methods (MacDougall, 2001, p.72).

What I find particularly interesting in MacDougall's 'reading' of Gardner's film is that he underscores the way that the filmmaker inhabits the world through his/her medium. In other words, the film becomes an expression of embodied experience. This is also central to Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel's *Leviathan* (2012). The latter followed in Gardner's suit in that their storytelling is neither character-driven nor does it rely on dialogue or on voice-over narration. Instead the directors focused on the diligent editing of sounds from the field with highly evocative images. In his seminal essay *Iconophobia* (1996) Castaing-Taylor asks,

“But what if film doesn't speak at all? What if film not only constitutes *discourse about* the world but also (re)presents *experience* of it? What if film does not *say* but *show*? What if a film does not just *describe* but *depict*? What, then, if it offers not only 'thin descriptions' but also 'thick depictions'?” (Taylor, 1996, p.86; emphasis in original)

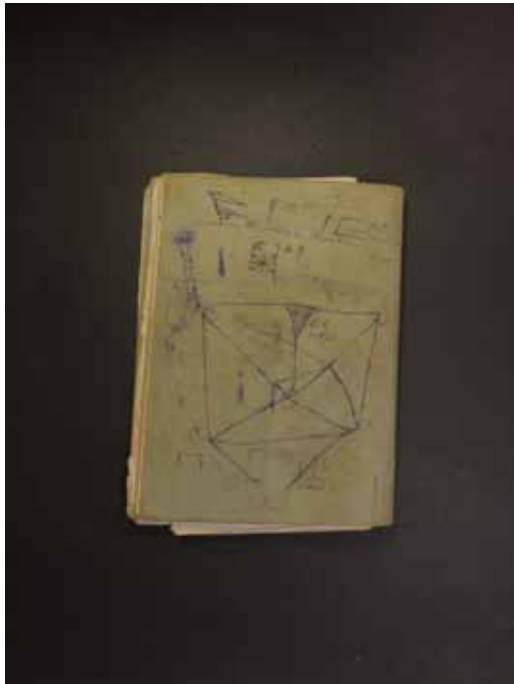
Castaing-Taylor and Paravel's film and its rendering of deep sea fishing as a glut of visceral audio-visual layers left me overwhelmed, disoriented and, dare I say, none the wiser about either the individual fishermen nor their way of life and methods of fishing. My experience of *Leviathan* resonates with Christopher Pavsek's critique of the film. Pavsek argues that voluminous depiction does not constitute anthropological knowledge and "the experience that the film offers remains quite *blind*" (Pavsek, 2015, p.5; emphasis in original). My interest in Pavsek's reflection lies in the way he argues that *Leviathan's* overwhelming aesthetics not only constitute an imposition on the public (*ibid.* p.7) but the film also fails on an ethical level in that it does not provide the public with the means to decode the experience they are engaged with (*ibid.*, p.8-9).⁷²

72 "What are the ethical implications of such an act of viewing, or of putting the viewers into such a position, that they are left with merely "making hypotheses" about the people they are viewing, especially when the people being viewed have no control over their own depictions, thick or thin? Or, to put it another way, is it an abdication of aesthetic, intellectual, and political responsibility if one refuses to provide an interpretation of the world viewed, and instead leaves the viewers to make sense of that world on their own terms, and perhaps thereby leave them to project onto that world a whole host of preconceptions with which they approach the film?" (Pavsek, 2015, p.8-9)

Thus, *Leviathan* can be seen as an opportunity to reflect on the limitations of anthropological knowledge caused by the sensory biases of the medium (in this case the audio-visuals of the film). By extension it also provides a chance to further discourses on the affordances of new media, multimodal storytelling and multisensory approaches to ethnographic practice (Nakamura, 2013).

My understanding of these evolving ideas of 'symphony' informs the way I produced my works as multi-dimensional artefacts through which I enable the public to engage with the world of Maltese fishermen in a reflexive manner. Focusing on user-centric multi-layered composite artefacts I rethink my own fieldwork experience as an ecology. Borrowing Bateson's idea of the meaning-making process as an ecology characterised by transversal journeying across spheres (personal, social, geographic amongst others) of different 'intensities', I experimented with multi-modal composites as fluid sites through which I could re-propose my own experience of emplaced learning with the fishermen.

The kind of emplaced experience that I seek to convey, or rather facilitate, is a reiterative process-based form of cross-temporal storytelling based on my reflection on time-based media, the symphonic and non-linear storytelling. Through Chambers' notion of



the Mediterranean as an open space that engenders inquiry I reflect on ideas of repetition, continuity, transience and duration and how these ideas inform the process of fabulation to speculate on tacit knowledge and memory. Chambers' notion is echoed by Rheinberger's writing on epistemology, "Contingency, [...], not only defines a free space of indeterminacy, it equally marks the condition of possibility for development and history. [...] In the end, research itself becomes the highest expression of the principle of contingency" (Rheinberger, 2010, p.11).

Chambers and Rheinberger bring me back to my focus on Salazar's conception of documentary making as "the creative treatment of possibilities" which I allude to in the previous chapter.

Thinking through the indeterminacy of form, the limitations of finite descriptions and non-linear documentary formats as a way to express the kind of tacit knowledge and situated awareness gained during fieldwork I tried to address a multitude of recurring questions such as;

- How did I experience, capture, interpret and translate the fishermen's body language, their swearing and screaming, their silences ... ?

- How do my multimedia 'set-ups' capture the dynamics of power between the men and their social interactions?
- How do I represent the beliefs, dreams and ambitions of the fishermen?
- How can my work evoke the visceral experience of fishing such as the smell of the fish, the movement of the boat, the water dripping on deck, the weight of the net, the heat rising from the engines, the exhaustion of the men ... ?

As noted in my introduction, in the course of my research I have produced five different pieces. These are; (i) *The fisherman's diaries* (Webdoc prototype, 2019), (ii) *Men leaving port at night and the light they carry* (film, 09:54mins, 2019), (iii) *A boat at night* (film, 09:30mins, 2019), (iv) *Dal-baħar madwarha* (5.1 channel 10:02mins looping sound installation, 2018) and (v) *Lampara II* (extended photographic essay, 2017-2019).

The development of these works is bound to the structural logic of the palimpsest as a storytelling model.

I will give a very brief description and background to each of the



works and then proceed to discuss them in-depth under three thematic sections titled *The Man*, *The Boat* and *The Place*.

Drawing on my previous reflections on artifice and the construction of knowledge I describe how structure, time and place are conceptualised through my practice. Further to this, I detail specific aspects in the making process to highlight the ways my practice reflects on knowledge as sensory experience(s) and how the generation of aesthetic tension can provide insight into the tacit knowledge of the fishermen.

Under the section entitled *The Man* I reflect on the construction of fishermen's identities in Malta by analysing the prototype for my webdoc, *The fisherman's diaries* (2019). I follow this by a close reading of two sequences from the two short films *Men leaving port at night and the light they carry* and *A boat at night* where I pay close attention to the use of voice as a marker of identity and how the subjects 'perform' in the presence of a camera in amateur footage obtained from Il-Glawd's family.

In the section entitled *The Boat* I explore embodied practice and the ways in which the making of my two films correlates with the vestibular-auditory-visual sensory triad at the core of my experience



The fisherman's diaries
prototype
outline

aboard the *Joan of Arc*. I outline how I dealt with issues of continuity, cross-temporalities, memory and contingency through rhythmic montage and the production of the sound installation *Dal-bañar Madwarha*.

In the last section I explore notions tied to *The Place*. This includes the socio-cultural environment and the geographic qualities that define the lives of fishermen's identities, the poetics tied to land and sea and my own immersion as a researcher. In reflecting on the opening sequence from the film *Men leaving port at night and the light they carry*, I trace the evolution of my working practice through a materialist reading of *Lampara II*.

3.1 The Man

3.1.1 The webdoc and identity construction

The fisherman's diaries is conceived as a webdoc - an online repository of different, purposely selected and creatively presented, multimedia components. Exploiting the affordances of online platforms, particularly their ability to support and connect a breadth of different media and online communities, I produced a prototype that could



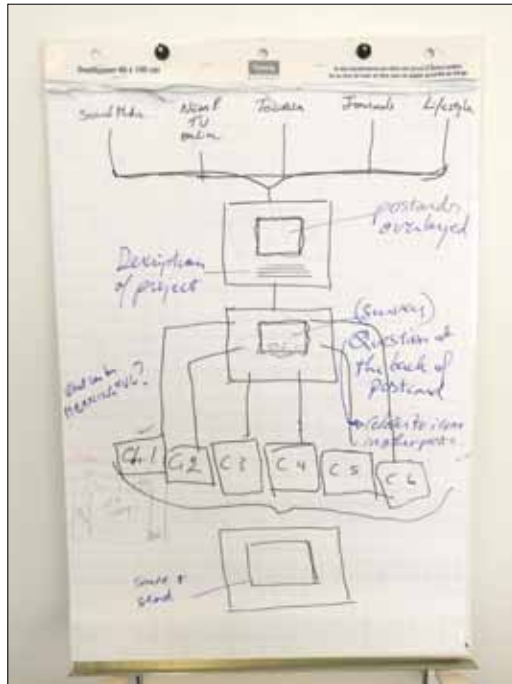
iFlab (2017)
workshop session

mediate between Il-Glawd's first person narrative as documented in his personal diaries, the family's photographic and video archives and my extended fieldwork experience, and the public.

My guiding principle in designing the *The fisherman's diaries* as a webdoc was to imagine the Mediterranean palimpsest as a multi-layered site where knowledge is garnered by moving – and at times getting lost – across different parts or 'pages'. As already described in previous chapters, rupture, contingency and fragmentation mark the speculative transversal trajectories followed by the researcher during fieldwork.

The scope for producing an online non-fiction storytelling site also benefits from the way the online platform; (i) allows for a large quantity of information to be presented as a composite whole (ii) is a medium accessible to a broad demographic that includes persons who are not involved with the art scene or who might be intimidated by artistic and intellectual circles and, (iii) is relatively inexpensive to produce, distribute, maintain and effect changes.

In producing the work I adopted the 'What-If-It' design-thinking strategy that I had learnt during my participation in the *iFlab* (Interactive Factual Lab) 2017 workshops led by Sandra Gaudenzi,



The fisherman's diaries
 first sketch for the narrative
 structure of my webdoc,
 2017.

Mike Robbins and Samuel Gantier⁷³ (Gaudenzi, 2019).

Guided by this methodological tool allowed me to focus on six key points in designing an online storytelling interface and then develop my work through an iterative process of prototyping, testing and adjusting. These points were; (i) defining the story, (ii) why is it relevant?, (iii) projected audiences, (iv) the functions of the interface (including an analysis of inspiring webdocs/interactive projects and potential competitors), (v) the desired impact of the project and (vi) the foreseen challenges.

My target audience was composed of anthropologists and other social scientists, audiovisual storytellers and fishermen, seafarers and their next of kin. I also identified other potential users namely educators, NGOs and Instagrammers. By trying to answer a series

73 Sandra Gaudenzi is an academic specializing in online non-fiction storytelling and senior lecturer at the University of Westminster. Mike Robbins is an award-winning creative technologist who was behind some of the most renowned interactive online documentaries including *After the storm* (PBS), Liv Miller's *The Shoreline project* and the much acclaimed *Highrise* by Kat Cizek. Samuel Gantier is associate professor at the university of Valenciennes, France specialising in UX design. Other supporting coaches included VR specialist Wim Forceville and Voyelle Acker who helped participants with pitching ideas, commissioning requirements and the marketing aspect of webdocs and interactive online documentaries.

of questions about social background, attitudes, knowledge, habits, feelings, behaviour, needs, frustrations, rapport with technology, etc I created six (imaginary) user profiles. These profiles were key to understanding the basic functions that my interface needed to perform and the demands it needed to address in order for it to be engaging.

Adopting this user-centred approach and in keeping with earlier explorations of non-linear storytelling and the fluidity of Mediterranean identities, the conceptual challenge was how to organise my material within the structure of an online database without imposing overbearing restrictions on the user's navigational freedom. How could I present the material in a comprehensive way without imposing a fixed storyline and/or narrative? How could I digitally reproduce the conditions (collaborative, participative, polyvocal, sensuous ...) that marked my research experience and draw users into the same relational process of meaning-making? I was also considering the content (subject matter, material qualities, symbolic value, narrative significance...) with which to populate the online storytelling platform.

Addressing my preoccupation with the asymmetrical power relationship between the persons in the frame and myself as

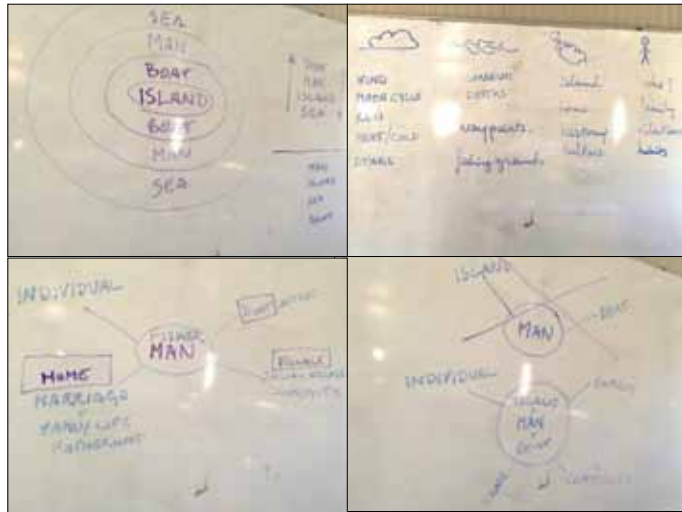


researcher and storyteller, I prioritised the use of audiovisual material collected from the family over my photographic, audio and video recordings. I also use Il-Glawd's diaries as much as possible.

Later in the process, after creating a mock digital prototype it was soon evident that the items presented needed some sort of contextualisation or commentary. Seeking inspiration from projects like *Lost and Found*, an NPR (National Public Radio - USA, 2012)⁷⁴ production about a collection of early colour photographs by an avid amateur photographer I decided to include my own voice-over commentary.⁷⁵ This necessary compromise worked as long as the 'voice' remained distinctly personal and mine. In so doing the story gained a second, more subjective, first person account that ran parallel to that of the family or the fisherman. What intrigued me most in this dynamic was the potential for meaning making in the (provocative/creative) tension that arose between the latter as 'the factual' account

74 This audio-driven project combines photography and voiceover to relate the experience of a researcher who found a trove of photographs by Charles Cushman (1896-1972), an amateur photographer. <https://www.npr.org/news/specials/2012/cushman/> See also <https://docubase.mit.edu/project/lost-and-found/>.

75 When designing the prototype for *The fisherman's diaries* I only retained the voice over in the introductory video to *The Man* storyboard. This allowed me to experiment with other video editing formats which will be tested alongside each other in the future.



The fisherman's diaries

Organising and editing my assets to structure and populate my webdoc, 2018.

and the former as my 'fictional' account.

Pursuing a subjective narrative required a careful re-examination of all the material gathered during the fieldwork followed by an editing process of elimination. In my first review process I started by grouping the family photos and videotapes according to subject matter. These groups included a good number of celebrations and social events including birthdays, marriages, anniversaries, family parties, the village feast, outings and holidays abroad, various boats, fishing trips, family group photos, children's photos, pet dogs, and other such photographs.

I developed guidance criteria to reduce both the number of potential images and video clips to use as well as the number of subjects represented. These were developed as (i) the attention il-Glawd gave to certain subjects (people, places, events...) in his diaries or as reported by third parties in informal interviews, (ii) the socio-historic relevance of the subject and (iii) striking aesthetic qualities. I also actively sought to include items representing curious or intriguing subject matter or had unorthodox audio-visual qualities including blemishes, aging and signs of wear and tear.

I repeated the selection and elimination exercise until I reduced the



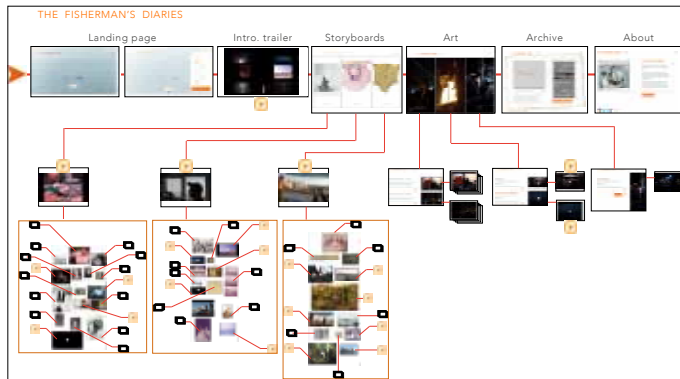
The fisherman's diaries
Storyboards
2018 - 2019.

groups to three; the man, the boat and the place, limiting each group to having an approximate twenty items. Based on my reading of il-Glawd's diaries (including his tone of writing and the frequency of mentions of particular subjects) and my own experience in the field these three groups represent the core spheres across which one can journey and trace a holistic account of what being a Maltese fisherman means.

These three core thematic groups were first conceived - and literally digitally laid-out (composed) - as an assemblage in the form of a constellation of items. This layout eventually served as the guiding idea in the development of the final design of the prototype.⁷⁶

In the section entitled *The man* I focused mostly on the personal life of il-Glawd, Ġużeppi and Antoine 'showing' them from their childhood years up until maturity. The photographs, footage and documents selected for this section mostly show intimate moments amongst family and friends and through these I trace il-Glawd's story as patriarch, fisherman, son, husband, father and colleague. In so doing I also paid particular attention to body language, dress, participation

⁷⁶ In producing this prototype I had the technical assistance of Dr Sandro Spina who is a lecturer in Computer Science at the Faculty of Information and Communication Technology at the University of Malta.



The fisherman's diaries
structure
2020.

See Appendix 3

in events and places (as well as aesthetic qualities) as potential revelatory signs of their relationships, beliefs, social skills, attitudes to life and personality.

Under the theme of *The boat* I brought together written documents including contracts, reports and payment records, photographs and footage of the *Joan of Arc*, the boat which il-Glawd commissioned in the early 60s and which remained a constant concern throughout his career. I therefore also sought to include evidence or traces of how over the years the boat 'outgrew' its purpose as a fishing vessel and became a family symbol. My understanding of the boat's evolution and meaning for the family members is that the symbolic agency of the boat transformed from being a means to an end as a source of livelihood, to also being recognised as an object of memory within the family's narrative. I also included references to the Lampara fishing process and the kind of sensory experience that one gets during this process.

In the section entitled *The place* I provide fragments of maps as well as il-Glawd's writings, photographs and footage material to highlight the geographical specificities and the socio-historical context of Marsaxlokk, portraying the development of the location from a small dormant fishing village into a popular tourist attraction. In so doing I



Men leaving port at night and the light they carry
2019

not only provide insight into changing lifestyles of the fishermen and their families, their behaviour and their adaptability to change but also hint at changes in what motivated their representation over the years and the poetics tied to Mediterranean identities.

The decision to retain three core groups was mainly a pragmatic choice envisaged as a way to facilitate ease of use and user retention. Working around these considerations of navigability within the logic of the palimpsest I designed an interface where information is layered across the vertical and horizontal axis.

The 'user' constructs his/her story by navigating transversally through a wealth of different assets spread across seven different sections. These sections include (i) the landing page, (ii) the introductory trailer video, (iii) the three storyboards, (iv) the archive, (v) the artworks produced during the course of research, and (vii) the about section including links to social media and contact information.

3.1.2 Self-representation and the audiovisual record

Men leaving port at night and the light they carry is a short documentary film (09:54 minutes) which was originally intended for an online academic journal produced by the CREAM Caucus



A boat at night
2019

group of graduate students at the University of Westminster. In this film I experimented with essayistic filmmaking techniques based on split-screen editing formats, cross-temporalities and methods of self-representation. By juxtaposing my own observational type of footage with corresponding video clips and photographs shot by the fishermen themselves in the past I conceived the film as an interrogatory space based on subject matter and contrasting aesthetic qualities (the degree of indexicality expressed by varying material qualities of the audiovisual and recording techniques). Juxtaposition was used as a way of breaking the otherwise linear progression of the film to provoke public engagement through conflict and rupture.

Exploiting aesthetic tensions to trigger emotional response was also the scope behind the other - quasi-iconoclastic⁷⁷ - short film called *A boat at night* (09:30 minutes). The film was conceived as an immersive audiovisual experience of what happens during a night of Lampara fishing emphasising the multitude of sensorial stimuli associated with night-time industrial fishing. Combining subjective camera work, long takes and photographs with a dense layering of sounds from aboard

⁷⁷ My understanding of quasi-iconoclastic is that the picture quality is strategically impoverished and the use of the visual is measured with lengthy sequences shot in complete darkness where visual referents are few and far between.



Lu tempu di li pisci spata
(1954)
Vittorio de Seta

the boat and from underwater recordings, the film seeks to envelop the public within a rich sensescape of varying audiovisual intensities. Dark, raw and grainy footage from a GoPro camera is intercut with colour-rich abstract imagery accompanied by crude rambling sounds from the engine that often fade into underwater sounds. This movement from moments of lyricism to unpolished realism draws on the medium's capacity for hapticity as generated by dissonant audiovisual elements.

In both *Men leaving port at night and the light they carry* and *A boat at night* I refrained from translating speech or using voice-over. This choice was influenced by the documentary works which Vittorio di Seta produced in Sicily in the 1950s and his later 1980 *La Sicilia Rivisitata*⁷⁸ (translated as *Sicily Revisited*). Similarly, my choice was also influenced by the way Gardner uses sound in *Forest of Bliss* (1985) and how subsequent researchers at Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab developed this technique (Nakamura, 2013; see

78 De Seta's poetic documentary works definitely deserve more attention than I accord him in this thesis. His work is particularly interesting for this project mainly because of Sicily's proximity to Malta but also because he often celebrated the work and life of peasants, fishermen and disenfranchised communities in rural areas. He has produced at least three short documentaries about fishermen *Pescher-ecci* (1958), *Contadini del Mare* (1955) and *Lu tempu di li pisci spata* (1954). For further reference see Sorrel, 2017; Arecco, 2009.



Men leaving port at night
and the light they carry

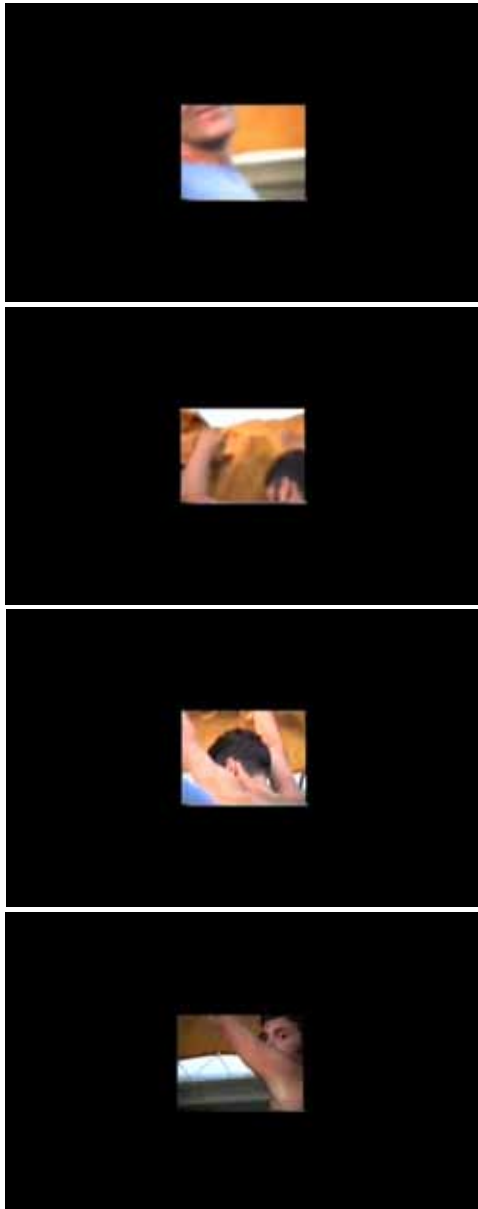
Gilbert Collaps and the crew of the *Joan of Arc*
Marsabit port, SE Malawi
2013 - 2018



also introduction to this chapter). In producing these works I was exploring how this absence of speech or ‘text’ could serve to further the public’s engagement through impressionistic relational worlds.

While the works I referred to helped me contextualise, analyse and critically evaluate my working methods and storytelling practice, earlier documentary films provided me with an array of approaches to documenting seafarers and fishermen. Amongst these I found the camerawork (hand-held by non-professionals) in Thor Heyerdahl’s *Kon-tiki* (1950) expeditionary film particularly striking whilst films like *Heroes of the North Sea* by AE Jones (1925) and John Grierson’s *Drifters* (1929) and *Granton trawler* (1934) are noted for the way they managed to override the technological limitations of their recording tools in part through a clever use of montage technique. Of specific note in the latter is the way montage was used to associate sea, man, fish and machinery and translate the experience of being at sea as a rhythmic editing project.

In the two minutes that follow the title slide of *Men leaving port at night and the light they carry* I chose to reduce the image on screen and focus on a small frame in the centre leaving a generous blank margin all around. This reduction of visual space is strategically intended as a way to draw the viewer’s focus and attention.



Throughout the two minutes the footage is entirely composed of digitised VHS footage from the family collection and shows the preparation of the boat before departing on a fishing trip and the exit from Marsaxlokk port. In the beginning the shot is from the quay towards the moored *Joan of Arc* but this point of view is reversed at 01:15 so the point of view of the camera is from onboard the boat towards the land and the camera is being operated by the men themselves. Joking and general banter is heard as the recording camera changes hands.

The camera wanders and the sharp (high pitched) fast talking voice of a man says “All right, all right” in quick succession. The camera continues to wander aimlessly for another couple of seconds until it settles on the hands of a deckhand rolling a yellow sheet of canvas (used for shading the sun during the day). As the camera moves around seeking its subject there is a very brief off camera exchange between two men of different ages and overriding this exchange another voice is heard. What I found compelling in these voices are the very distinct timbres they carry and how suggestive the voice is of the age of the men speaking. In the first exchange one of the men is understood to be middle-aged through his firm deep voice while the other’s voice is weak and rather hoarse as if the vocal cords have lost their ability to project sound.



“Hawn hu, hawn hu ... hawn hu Noel ...”, (transl. Here he is, here he is ... here’s Noel ...)” says the old man, who, judging by the synchronicity of his voice and the movement of the camera and the proximity of his voice to the microphone, is doing the filming. The deckhand rolling the tarpaulin hears his name and turns his head to face the camera not quite sure what’s happening and for a brief moment the young man, not much older than a boy, looks directly at the viewer, hands held high and face half covered by the raised arm.

There are three points from this sequence between the old man and the youngster (01:45-02:01) that I felt were interesting enough to explore further in my subsequent works; first, the timbre of the voice as marker of age and by extension, experience and knowledge; secondly the repetition of words as sounds complementing the pervasive droning of the engine and finally the sense of poetry that comes from juxtaposing the old man’s voice to the young man’s face. As I will show in section 3.2.3, drawing parallelisms between man and engine is a recurrent aesthetic device that occurs under many guises not only in my work but also in many key documentaries about fishermen and their trade.

The juxtaposition of old and young age is interesting particularly when



mediated through the filmic medium as a relational combination of auditory and visual elements. What held my attention in this sequence was the combination of sound and audio, the values each carries and what kind of relationship they establish on screen. The old man is heard but never seen. The young man is seen, his half-surprised turn of the head towards the camera is watched in close up but he's never heard. His arms held up unable to move away from the old man's lens. The camera gives agency to the old man that is completely denied to the younger man and by extension restores some sort of vigour back into the old man.

The age and experience of crew members also features extensively in *A boat at night*. In the first part of the film, juxtaposition techniques are used to speculate on context as determined by the relationship between the men, the boat and the sea. However, the middle section of the film (03:09-07:15) is structured around the feelings that accompany the long stretches of waiting, looking and searching in the dark that are typical of the Lampara fishing method. In the first minute of the four-minute sequence, the relatively flat character of the audio and the extensive use of photographs lead the viewer into a quasi-meditative state. The pace is slowed down and there is a sense of loss particularly because nothing much seems to be happening, there are no audio clues and the image on screen is dominated by darkness.



The power generator is switched off and a sense of quiet takes over. Ġużeppi and Antoine talk amongst themselves from their respective boats while a rustling of feet and clinking metal suggest activity on deck. The camera roams blindly as it struggles to find a subject in the dark until it settles on the manhole leading to the hold where the men are putting away the extractor fans.

A loud high-pitched sound from the engine starter is used at this point to break the silence and marks an abrupt cut to close-up footage of Ġużeppi's face as he talks into the hand-held radio (transmitter). The camera struggles to find focus as Ġużeppi calls Antoine over the radio. There's a cut to black and Ġużeppi is seen rowing his boat and carefully assessing the surrounding conditions. A radio conversation in which Ġużeppi is heard instructing Antoine about the currents and the best way to cast the net serves as a voice-over to this sequence.

There is however a very subtle shift in distance here that occurs on an aural level. While Ġużeppi's first call on the radio was obviously recorded from Ġużeppi's boat the ensuing conversation was recorded from the bridge of the *Joan of Arc*. Adding to these varying layers of voices are the sounds recorded on deck; buoys being hauled on deck, boots walking on wood, the shuffling of feet, the grunts of a man and other sounds indicating activity. These different layers of sounds



accompany the changing visuals as they shift from Ġużeppi's boat to photographs from the inside of the bridge to GoPro footage of two men moving towards the bow of the *Joan of Arc* and fade into the darkness.

The camera is stilled and the radio conversation stops. A pregnant silence sets in as the lens slowly finds focus on a close-up shot of a youngish man attentively looking sideways echoing Ġużeppi's earlier demeanour.⁷⁹ A rambling engine sound slowly creeps over the silence synching with the focusing adjustment. This is layered with the solemn murmur of a man in prayer. The layered sounds, combined with the red cast of the image and the oblique angle of the shot from over the man's shoulder, are woven together into a moment of dramatic anticipation. There are neither big expressive gestures nor any distracting elements within the picture frame and the visual composition zeroes in on each of the men against a flat dark background. The sparse visual referents within the picture frame amplify the significance of what is spared for examination on screen. Each of the men's slightest of moves or twitch of an eye becomes the subject of close scrutiny and speculation.

⁷⁹ Ġużeppi himself is aware of this shift in demeanour. He has often told me this himself saying that although he is constantly cracking jokes he is extremely attentive when it comes to this part of the fishing process.

The subjects are tightly framed. Each scene is dense and heavy with an air of gravity. The men seem to be in a state of heightened awareness. They are alert. They survey their surroundings with a keen preying eye. The slow calculated movements and the earnest looks provide no details as to what exactly the men are up to.⁸⁰

My decision to favour the emotional aspect of the scene rather than provide a step-by-step account (in the form of a voice-over, a text slide, an interview ...) of what the men are doing and what's happening around them was solely based on my first hand experience. This is possibly the most delicate part of the fishing process. It is the moment where the decision whether to lay the net or not is made and in which direction. The men on the *Joan of Arc* are positioned to start work. They are also waiting to get their first idea of the size of the catch for the day, in other words, how much money will they get for their

⁸⁰ The men doing this job are usually amongst the most experienced of the crew. They have two main tasks (i) to check the strength and direction of the top and bottom currents and (ii) to assess the quantity of fish that has gathered under the light and if the quantity is worth laying the net for or not. In addition they also keep an eye on passing traffic and the strength and direction of the wind that will later influence the direction of where the boat will drift to when fishing (i.e. laying/hauling nets - not anchored).

night's work. The situation is palpably volatile and tempers are high. This is also the moment when one can really feel the men's sense of vulnerability when facing the challenges posed by the weather and the sea.

Capturing the degree and complexity of emotions of the moment – in that particular space, the small boat - required a judicious employment of audiovisual recording tools. These recordings are also the result of direct previous experience and subsequent pre-emptive strategies that took in consideration the physical limitations of the working environment I was in and a sensitivity to the outside influences acting on my subjects.

Choosing the right film and photographic equipment gear that was not too bulky, with no external lights or flash guns and positioning myself so as to be as less intrusive as possible is necessary in such situations and it is a skill learnt through repeated experiences. This ultimately leads to another form of sensitivity and/or criticality when reading body language.

3.1.3 Body language, culturally coded gestures and performativity

Here I return to the opening sequence following the title card in *Men*



leaving port at night and the light they carry. In this section I focus on two very important details; (i) the sense of touch and physical proximity as an expression of complicity and intimacy and (ii) the subject's heightened sense of self-awareness that is the direct result of the recording (video) camera and the performative behaviour that ensues.

The sequence I will describe starts at 00:32 and ends at 01:37, opening with a wide shot of the *Joan of Arc* moored at the quay with two women on the left of the picture looking towards the men on the boat and then turning to the camera that zooms in on them. The handling of the camera is distinctly amateurish and the footage shows considerable abrupt zooming in and out and a succession of ad hoc compositions. The shot is cut to il-Glawd rowing his *frejgatina* (small boat) to the quay and talking to the cameraman whilst gesturing towards the *Joan of Arc*. He is quick in his movements but his greying hair betrays his age (he must have been around 65-70 at the time – my guess – Delimara power station chimney visible in the background so footage must be from the mid 1990s or later). The sequence cuts back to the men readying the boat to go fishing. The prevailing sound remains that of the engine.



The sequence continues to unfold in the small squarish frame at the centre of the screen. The camera is now on the boat looking towards the stern and one is given a quick glimpse of the net, ropes and men on deck as the boat leaves port. In the background il-Glawd is seen rowing in the frejgatina almost as if he wants to catch up with the larger boat. The camera person, possibly Ġużeppi, is heard for the first time (swearing – the obscenity is lost to non-Maltese speaking audiences) as a man crosses in front of the shot. The shot is then cut to the two women seen alone on shore waving and throwing kisses in jest.

The lightness and complicity of the two women can be seen in the way one of them seems to slap lightly the other's arm and in the way they naturally move closer to each other touching slightly as they look on towards the men on the departing boat. This short scene of the two women lasts a mere six seconds on screen and is easily missed by the audience. However, as I was reviewing and editing this footage, I came to appreciate more the subtlety of gestures and body language as carriers of meaning within a culture. Particularly that completely unconscious split second movement of the two women towards each other as a sign of complicity in that brief moment of fun reveals the extent of embodied (tacit knowledge and) cultural values.



From a critical point of view it is important to rewind 2-3 seconds and go back to the woman throwing kisses from the shore in a highly affected fashion that evokes theatrical overacting. The un-natural amplitude of the gestures that seem to come right out of a slapstick comedy raises the question as to who is her intended public? Who is she performing for? The answer is the presence of the camera on board the boat. The awareness that on this day, in contrast to many other ordinary days like this, a viewer or a broader 'public', a photo/videographer) was present.

This kind of self-awareness of the subject in front of the camera where the performative is turned into an improvised humorous act is a common occurrence in many of the other home videos provided by the family.⁸¹ This is presumably because the intended audience is often family and close acquaintances and fun is often part of what is expected from the viewing experience. Re-contextualised in this observational/documentary film experiment the comedy not only represents a moment of fun enjoyed by the subjects but, on a different level, it subverts the 'disengaged recording of life as-it-happens'

⁸¹ Similar instances include subjects talking directly to the camera with an affected voice, sticking their tongues out or making faces (eg. Girls playing at walking the catwalk or holding improvised singing contests or in instances where the camera turns on a shy individual and he/she is put on the spot).



convention in traditional observational filmmaking by acknowledging the presence of the camera.⁸²

3.2 The Boat

3.2.1 Continuity, memory and repetition

In *Men leaving port at night and the light they carry* I experimented with a variety of filmic qualities.⁸³ In the following pages I discuss how, motivated by a desire to challenge notions of linearity and explore alternative approaches to representing memory, fixity and change in documentary storytelling I opted to split screen in three at particular intervals in the duration of the film. The tripartite division happens specifically between 02:20-05:25 and 06:16-07:22. Separating the two sequences are photographic images. Throughout the five minutes between 02:20 and 07:22 the subject of the cameras

⁸² One can also discuss the role of sobriety in documentary making which in itself has been a subject of discussion and at times derision (see Kathryn Ramey, *Land without bread: Unpromised Land 1932 by Bunuel*, in Banks and Ruby (Eds.), 2011, p.270)

⁸³ This included experimenting with: image quality and textures produced by different cameras and technologies (VHS and digital); handling of the cameras and the varying intentions of the cameraperson; glitches in the video footage; the combination of photographs and film footage. I also did the same exercise with the audio tracks.



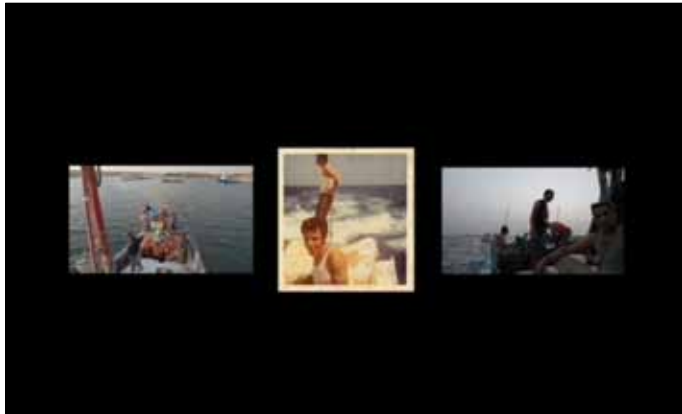
is the stern of the boat.

Organised horizontally, the three frames sharing the screen space (without touching) were conceived as three different timelines across which similar activities occur.⁸⁴ This was not only meant as a quasi-literal translation of the idea of repetition and return (intimately tied to both the transmission of knowledge in the fishing trade as well as the idea of Mediterranean identity as a whole) but also as a way of provoking criticality through a format that forced the viewer into a comparative exercise by running simultaneous scenes that closely resembled each other, that linked together or that jarred completely with one another.⁸⁵

In the first few seconds the frames on the left and at the centre both show the *Joan of Arc* navigating in between the boats anchored in Marsaxlokk port. The frame on the right shows men at the stern of the boat which is already out at sea. The sound is of a conversation

⁸⁴ This film was edited on Final Cut Pro X which, like most other editing suites, has a horizontal timeline section at the bottom. To my knowledge (I am a self-thought video editor) multiple frames within a screen require multiple editing timelines that sit on top of each other. This top to bottom configuration is something which I haven't explored as a way of showing the work mainly because of the way it implies a vertical (power) structure.

⁸⁵ See also Cowie, 2009, p.127.



between the old man and another man. The frame at the centre is the least stable of the three with the camera moving erratically and with frequent random zooming in and out.

The most significant moment is when the three frames show the same 'scene' from different fishing trips – men sitting at the stern. This is an important moment where the three timelines come together through a shared context (the *Joan of Arc*) and shared 'habits' or use of space where the stern and deck serve as both working and social spaces. Moreover, the importance of the stern as a place of memory is amply evidenced by the frequency with which it features in family photographs and home videos as well as my own audiovisual records.

The stability of the shots in the frames on the left and the right suggest that the camera was fixed in a single position pointing at what appears to be a nondescript mundane space. Considering the sense of disengagement with the subject (particularly in the beginning), the lack of action and the mundane subject together with the placement of the cameras themselves (left, high point of view, right, low point of view) has a feel of surveillance CCTV footage. Emphasising this quality is also the arrangement of multiple frames on a single screen.

What was evident to me was that what linked these scenes was not



merely the stern of the boat and the kind of activity that takes place there, but equally significant, was the horizon line at the background. The horizontal line running across the screen from one frame to another constitutes an important visual referent that provides both compositional coherence as well as thematic continuity. Before proceeding to discuss the poetic or symbolic implications of the sea's horizon, it is worth drawing attention to the way the poles in the left and right frames are used as framing devices forming a stable grid-like pattern across which henceforth all 'scenes' unfold and across which all visual connections are made.

In the meantime, in the frame at the centre, the camera continues to move randomly from what looks like a survey of the port from the top of the boat's bridge to the boats in tow that are still being manned by il-Glawd for two minutes and then, at 04:24 switches to a succession of six old photos showing various images of the boats (used as supporting 'effort' in the fishing process) in tow to men sitting together or individually at the rear of the boat. Throughout the whole three minutes the cameras in the adjoining frames remain fixed. The latter is directly inspired by observational cinema's long takes where the subject of interest becomes the unedited unfolding of events as

they happen.⁸⁶

At the time of editing I was attentive to the correlation between the three frames and how the movement of the men (the way they move, sit, where they're looking, what they are wearing, etc) in the frames echo or contrast with the other two.

Similarly, the audio moves from the left speaker to the right combining diegetic sounds and off camera sounds or conversation. The proximity of the voices makes it clear that the conversation is happening right behind the camera thus indexing my presence as a subjective filmmaker and this continues as the succession of photographs is broken by a blank screen followed by a photograph of a couple kissing on deck.⁸⁷ The sound of loud laughter and repeated sentences accompany the photograph and the subsequent black screen at 05:45.

86 I am using the term 'observational' in the way Nichols describes it as unobtrusive filming (Nichols, 2017, p.22, p.132). See also Vannini, 2020; Lewis (Ed.), 2004; Haider, 2006.

87 I was tempted to edit this alongside footage of members of the crew horse playing and wrestling each other on deck but ultimately I decided against because it didn't fit the mood nor the narrative of the film as a whole.



No sound other than the engine accompanies the next photograph in the film at 05:52-06:07. This is possibly the photograph that touches me most of all given to me by the family. The focal point is at the centre of the composition where a man completely dressed in bright yellow is huddled in a corner of the stern with his arms wrapped around his knees and his head buried inside them. He seems to be sleeping between the net and the wood of the boat. Behind him is the sea.

The photograph is composed in a striking palette almost exclusively comprised of primary colours. The image is split in two with the sea in the background and the boat in the foreground. The edges of the boat leading to the corner where the man is crouching form a triangular shape which is repeated by the white triangle in the immediate foreground. On the left hand side of the image stands the circular shape of a bright red winch. The net, also in red, crosses the picture space from left to right in an organic shape that extends beyond the picture space on the right.

The visual impact of this picture and the way it ruptures the momentum of the preceding sequence, allows for a poetic interpretation of the scene. A man, crouched in an almost foetal position immobile in between the sea and the tools of his trade. A man sleeping, maybe dreaming, at sea. A tired man for whom night-



time came in broad daylight. A man by himself. The vulnerability (near emasculation) of the man is accentuated by both the crouching position he's in and the overwhelming sense of solitude that this picture transmits particularly when contrasted with the preceding images of groups of men socialising and working together or the couple's intimacy in the same spot where he lies.

The loneliness and isolation of the man is further accentuated by the way the preceding shouting and booming laughter of the crew seconds earlier in the film is reduced to a low rambling sound that fades quietly until the screen goes dark.

At 06:16 the focus is specifically turned towards the movement of the boat. Three frames re-appear on screen, the sound of the engine seems to have grown deeper and the colour temperature has been reduced to mostly greys and blues. On the left an interior shot shows two windows one shut the other open swinging gently with the movement of the boat and wind producing a gentle kind of banging sound. The wind is further perceived through the movement of scrap cloth or plastic bags hanging right outside. In the middle frame is a mid-shot of a bald middle-aged man with his hand to his chin. In the right frame a close-up shot of a man's hand bringing a glass of tea to his mouth, then holding it in front of him and finally bringing it to rest

in front of his torso. The camera follows this movement and settles on the man's torso as he continues drinking his tea until he leans forward towards the camera and I focus again on the hand holding the raised glass.

Mid-sequence I recompose the shot in the middle, without cutting, and as I do that the man stands up and walks out of the frame (in a way that might indicate his unease at being closely scrutinised by the video camera) opening the 'view' to the sea at the back and one of the boats in tow. Once again the horizon line becomes the focus of the frame in the middle. In the left frame I cut to a close-up shot of the window and in so doing I bring the edge of the window frame in-line with the horizon and the tea swinging in the man's hand on the right.⁸⁸ In hindsight, even if the three frames work very well together to transmit the sense of movement that is an integral part of the experience of being out at sea, I still feel that I could have explored or 'played around' with this filmic sequence and the accompanying sounds better particularly in the way man, machine and boat 'flow' or 'float' together.

Underlying this reflection is a preoccupation with interpreting how the sea and the wind hold absolute command over the fishermen

⁸⁸ This image of the tea in a glass held between fingers always reminds me of a gyroscope.



and how in turn the latter have developed their vestibular and proprioceptive capabilities ('sea legs') in relation to the surrounding environment. In the following pages I will explore how I conceptualised and tried to address this issue of embodied practice in the making of *A boat at night*.

3.2.2 Moving in and moving with the boat

A number of images are repeated, under various guises, throughout the film (*A boat at night*). It is important to stress that all that is shown in the film takes place on and around the boat. It is the boat as sea that sets the rhythm, the mother matrix of all that is shown in this film. The men, the action, the connections ... are all in synch with and framed by - literally and metaphorically - the structures of the boat and its function as a fishing vessel. This is succinctly captured in the simple and unsophisticated qualities of the opening sequence.

Seven men packed in a confined dark space with a single light source coming from the top in the middle. On one side is an industrial switchboard, on the other hang towels, items of clothing and a small mirror, at the back two bunk beds. The men sit and chat casually as they pass tea glasses around. The man at the center smokes

a cigarette. One can barely distinguish the faces of these bodies swinging in synch back and forth in the penumbra and conversation is only heard in occasional distant irruptions into the prevailing noise of engine and the distorted sound of men's voices coming through a radio. The sobriety of the latter accentuated by the toneless repetition of "two two zero zero - two two zero zero" gives way to the Muslim call for prayer coming from a mobile phone.

The image is dark and grainy, is shot from a fixed high central angle and lasts 30 seconds. The fixity of the picture is complemented not only by the compositional amassment of silhouettes and limbs but also, more importantly, by their collective movement as bodies responding simultaneously to external forces.

Movement - here understood in both its literal and its figurative sense - is directly related to the specific relationship of bodies (human or otherwise) in space and the broader environmental context. In other words, movement is intimately tied to the (body animating or venturing across a) physical structure, the construction of the said space and the material world which it 'inhabits'. Equally important is the consideration of movement as the force driving most situated



relational processes.⁸⁹

With this understanding of movement in mind, simultaneity (as collective action tied to a particular moment) becomes an interesting concept to explore particularly because of its implications for understanding the way(s) bodies connect in and across time and space. I lack the competence to debate the merits of synchronization in narrating identities but I am nonetheless intrigued by the similarities one can draw from thinking about simultaneity as (un/choreographed, multi-spatio-temporal) correspondence. Along this speculative train of thought, and with Butler's articulation of identity as "a stylized repetition of acts", the idea of synchronicity provoked me to think further about the notion of continuity and the expressive potential of rupture in film.

Correlating these ideas helped me reflect on the editing process in terms of (i) storytelling as networked concurrent events and (ii) my own response to the movement of the boat and how it changed my filmmaking.

⁸⁹ By extension, this idea of emplacement and embodiment is key to understanding Mediterranean (fishermen's) identities as epistemes rooted in the poetics of journeying, migration and polyvocality.



Although the Lampara fishing process guides the film's narrative progression, the editing follows a cyclical structure. The step-by-step process, from identifying the fishing grounds to laying and hauling nets and packing the fish, is broken down into eight loosely related/connected parts. Each part has a specific thematic focus (bridge, light, men sleeping, the wait, Guzeppi's approach, reading the currents, netting the fish, hauling the nets) and for each I tried to identify a number of qualities to use as starting points for my experimentation. In identifying these qualities, I was looking at which, and how, audiovisual qualities and aesthetic elements prevailed during specific parts of the fishing process. Selecting the video and audio clips prior to the start of my editing I was not only looking at the subject matter but I was also looking at the intensity of light and colours, the dynamism or symmetry of the compositions, rhythmic elements and variations, the texture of the image or the sound and other distinctive attributes. Proceeding thus I was able to identify what could be termed as the distinguishing matrix of the moment or subject matter and use that same matrix as the leading idea in my attempt at exploring creative immersive strategies.

Each sequence or part employs a subject/moment-specific aesthetic. At times the camerawork is directly inspired by observational cinema particularly in those sequences where camera lingers from a distance

on the subject (eg: man sleeping on deck at 02:29-02:59). At other times the camera becomes much more mobile and subjective. It moves alongside the labouring men, 'dives' from the bow to the stern or is caught in the net with the fish. In my edit I was also seeking to exploit the full-range of material qualities, the audiovisual textures - including the distortions and technical peculiarities - produced when the camera is worked to the limits of its abilities both above as well as underwater. In this film I ventured well beyond the conventions of observational cinema and decided to not only use the graininess and the noise of the image but I also included frequent moments of almost absolute darkness. Throughout the film, lyricism, the visually crude and the quasi-iconoclastic alternate between themselves composing a fragmentary and diverse visual-scape characterized by dissonance.

The audio track is also modelled in a very similar fashion around the droning sound of the engine complemented by the rustling sounds of rope on deck. These two prevailing sounds were conceived as a dual base track for the film marking the passage of time but also serving as a nod to the recursive as a fundamental structural element in storying Mediterranean identities.⁹⁰

90 I return to the qualities of this audio track below when I describe my immersive audio piece for *Dal-Baħar Madwarha*.

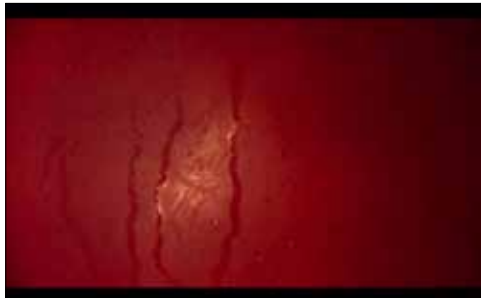
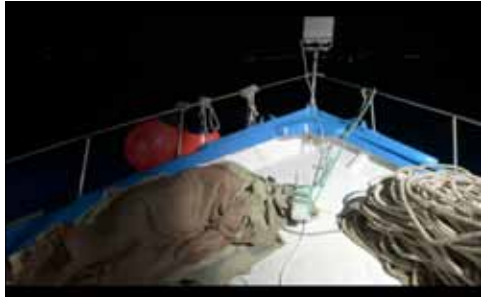


The sequence that follows the first (01:33-01:52) takes the form of a survey of the boat from the outside. Shot from a secondary boat going round the anchored *Joan of Arc*, the power generator is turned on (we hear rather than see the generator) and the lights flood into the surrounding darkness. The move from darkness into blinding brightness is subsequently taken up not only as a core part of the *Lampara* fishing method but also as the central metaphor in the film.

The visual 'survey' of the boat and by extension its surrounding environment, and the idea of blindness are explored concurrently. In the first part of the film this relationship is perhaps most explicit in the juxtaposition of the images of men sleeping with the traditional eyes attached to the sides of the bow.⁹¹ The mood and the narrative of the film gain a dreamy quality when the scenes of sleep and eyes are cut alongside short sequences of pure colour ranging from bright blue underwater scenes to the orangey reds⁹² of the buoys tied to the railings on the bow. The flickering light tracing the rivulets of dew

91 To my knowledge there is no academic study as to the origins of these 'eye' motifs attached on either side of the boats' bows. Fishermen give differing interpretations for their existence. Some fishermen attribute this to boat-building heritage, others see them as 'charms' to ward off the evil eye while others say that they are remnants of an old belief where the boat is given eyes to find fish.

92 Colour temperatures are employed as emotional vehicles and are strategically used to further public engagement with the subject.



settled on the buoy is then juxtaposed with the image of the silvery fish swimming randomly underwater. This juxtaposition forcefully brings light, water and fish together through a study of colour, texture and movement. Later this triad is condensed in a longish sequence where fish are seen gathering at the surface of the water with lightning flashes in the background. The accompanying soundscape starts from the crude rhythmic sound of the power generator and moves into a muffled rambling sound recorded through underwater gopro cameras. The volume is generally low with slight fluctuations including a moment of complete silence. The recording of the deep bass rambling sound evokes a primeval quality adding a sense of anticipation and dream-like quality to the whole.⁹³

3.2.3 The fishing process as an ecology of sounds

The *Dal-Baħar Madwarha* (2018) audio installation was a 5.1 channel immersive piece for a group exhibition where the curator selected artists to conceptualise the sea as a place of reflection, memory and change. The work forced me to reevaluate my research for its bias towards the primacy of the visual, retrain my hearing skills and

⁹³ For further reading see Stefan Helmreich, *An anthropologist underwater: Immersive soundscapes, submarine cyborgs, and transductive ethnography*, 2007. See also Alexandra Warwick, *The Dreams of Archaeology*, 2012.



rethink fieldwork in auditory terms.

What was clear from the beginning of working exclusively with sound was that space cannot be thought of only in the third dimension. Through the 5.1 setup I strove to create a multi-layered haptic soundscape where, within the limitations of a small exhibition space, the sea and “the spectator [become] both a subject of imagination and an embodied subject” (Cowie, 2009, p.125).

In this section I explore ways in which thinking about spatiality and fluidity of form led me to further my experimentation with the photographic medium and explore new tactile possibilities from within the materiality of the image itself. In the final part of this chapter I discuss the development of my documentary photography and the reasons behind the final *Lampara II* selection in the form of an extended photographic essay.

Following the *Dal-Bañar Madwarha* brief I started to work by translating notions of time and movement to what I considered to be their aural equivalents. Imagining the narrative as a fluctuating rhythm punctuated by sounds of varying intensities and pitch, I laid down a sequential base track, similar to the drum beat in a song, that was mostly composed of the droning sound of the boat’s engine.

Relating this repetitive droning sound to the fishermen's work at sea (the skills as a repetition of gestures, the engines and tools involved), the transmission of skills through kinship and the experience of time⁹⁴ I speculated about the conditions that shaped this sequential unfolding of 'events' as well as the sensorial experience of a fishing trip that takes place at night. This led me to think of the haptic qualities of sound; what feeling does the sound of metal, or the sound of gurgling water, or the sound of a man's breathing, evoke?

I spent a considerable amount of Summer 2017 learning how to work with different microphones on the boat, whilst keeping out of harm's way and not disturbing the men while they work. Using the right equipment and moving safely on the boat was but the first hurdle. I started my research by going through the video recordings I had of the many trips I had done previously and tried to identify key sounds. This selection was largely determined by the exhibition curator's brief and the ambition to create an immersive 5.1 channel sound piece. I drew a list of sounds I needed to capture and grouped them according to the

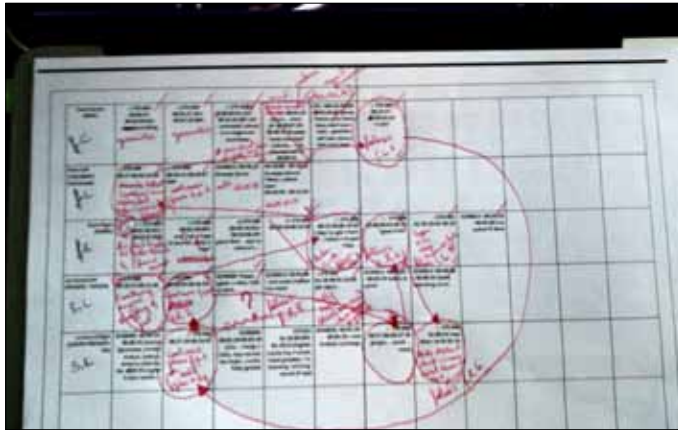
94 Indeed the juxtaposition of human activity, machine and environment is a recurrent theme in the city-symphony genre and montage-driven filmmaking. This technique is employed extensively in Grierson's *Drifters* (1929) and *Granton Trawler* (1936), and in Jones' *Heroes of the North Sea* (1925).



microphones I was using on specific nights.

To record sound I used an on-camera directional microphone (Rode Videomic pro), a Shotgun condenser microphone (Sennheiser 416 mounted in a blimp system), lavalier microphones (Sennheiser EW112p G3 - wireless), binaural microphones and the stereo condenser microphones on my digital recorder (Zoom H4n).

The choice of microphones was determined by what I wanted to record and how I wanted to use it in the narrative, the place I was planning to work in and the weather conditions for the night. When windy I could only work inside the bridge where I was limited to the use of small microphones due to space constraints. In the bridge I recorded conversations mostly between the captain and his men and radio communications. I also recorded random (wild) sounds coming from 'outside' or from the adjacent kitchenette. When the weather was average and the sea swell not too high I worked on deck recording the men at work and individual sounds of engines, machinery, ropes, shuffling of feet etc ... On days when the wind was Beaufort force 1-2, I could afford to work on the smaller boat with Guzeppi and have lengthy conversations while we waited for Antoine to lay the net around us.



Dal-Baħar Madwarha
editing notes,
2017.

When it came to the editing stages, having never done a sound piece before nor had any experience with editing or ‘composing’ for sound surround systems, I experimented with familiar schemes of production. I first wrote a very sketchy idea of what I was aiming to achieve and tentatively laid it over a single timeline. The next step was to identify 5 specific spaces on the boat where the majority of the sounds were recorded and juxtaposed them over the floor plan of the installation. In this manner the boat’s bow corresponded to the front centre speaker, portside to the front left speaker and so on and so forth.

Mapping sound clips in this way showed me the ‘hot spots’ and areas of the boat which were of less importance than others or were more difficult to access (eg the stern where usually the net is placed and from where it is released). The direct transliteration from boat to the five point speaker set-up envisaged for the installation also brought to the fore the limitations of such literal thinking. Where (which speaker/direction) should underwater sounds come from? Why should I only include sounds coming from the boat and not use external sound clips?

Abandoning the sequential plan altogether, I started by mapping my assets over a 5 track Gantt chart that reflected the 5.1 channel set-up



more closely.

I organised each track/channel in accordance with the spatial logic (front left, front centre, front right, surround left, surround right) in which the speakers were to be organised. This helped me get to grips with the spatial dynamics of the soundscape I wanted to develop and consequently served as the initial model for importing (and cutting) my files in the 5 different tracks/timelines in the editing suite.

Of crucial importance to the development of the piece was that although I had a five tier layering scheme as a preliminary model for my editing, I could experiment with shifting sound clips across timelines and repeat others over more than one timeline.

The *Dal-Bañar Madwarha* piece is dominated by sounds coming from three distinct sources; human, machine and water. Human sounds are of two kinds; voices and breath. Mechanical sounds are mostly coming from the engines of the boats, the electricity generator, the lights mounted on the main boat and the winches used in the hauling of the nets. Water is either heard splashing against the keel under the bow of the boat in movement or dripping from the nets on the boat's deck as they are hauled aboard or as a muffling 'filter' for other sounds.



gather.⁹⁵

Based on the spatial arrangement of speakers around a receiver, the 5.1 set-up provides a heightened kind of spatial awareness. Unlike other audio installation formats, surround sound systems promise to convey a multi-directional aural experience akin to real-life listening conditions. While spatial perception might be mostly dependent on direction, amplitude, pitch and timbre of the sound sources, the identification of a space as a real place depends on how much I as the user feel like 'I am there'. In this respect ambient recordings carry most of the indexical weight but I was also aware of the potential of sound to suggest unidentifiable, formless, fluid forms that are conducive to a meditative state of mind or experience.

The piece starts with a deep rumbling low-pitched sound that slowly grows in amplitude. This sound is accompanied by a faint high-pitched flickering sound and a deep gurgling (underwater) sound. The sounds' amplitude rises and falls in fluctuating waves. The overall

95 As the net starts to close and the fish start to feel confined the school unites and start to swim in circles underneath the small boat mounted with the single light. I am mostly interested in the metaphorical interpretation of this circling. A brief explanation of this behaviour can be found here https://www.imr.no/filarkiv/2007/01/hi-news.1.07_ny_web.pdf/en



sound is a bassy muffled underwater sound. A softly spoken order, “Itfa” (translates as, “Throw [the anchor]!”) breaks the sequence and relocates us into the bridge, very close to Antoine captaining the boat. Although the order gets no spoken reply it sets in motion a whole series of activities identified by the rustling feet, rope and the clinking sound of metal-to-metal. This activity is broken by a splashing sound and we are transported back underwater. The gurgle sound of the sinking anchor slowly fades to the rhythmic rustling of rope as it lightly touches the wooden deck and rubs over the gunwale.

A sound of an engine and voices in the distance and Antoine’s next orders (“tawwal” translates as, “release [more rope]” , “urbot” translates as, “tie [the rope]!”) provide us with a sense of distance that spans between the bridge and the deck.

A piercing high-pitched sound (gas lamp) fades in over the ambient sounds and the relative calm is broken by the coarse starting sound of the generator. Once again high and low pitch tracks overlap each other. The flickering sound returns and is louder. Individual sounds become more difficult to discern as more layers of sound are juxtaposed. The rhythm of fluctuating sounds becomes more urgent. Voices, engines and gurgling water are layered into an opaque mass of sounds but quickly dies down and Antoine’s voice suddenly takes us back into the



bridge. It is quiet. The engine is switched off and silence is animated by the occasional soft rocking sound of objects on the wooden deck.

Ġużeppi's distant voice pierces the silence, "Meta tridu salpaw ghax is-2.30AM" (translates as, "You can 'take off' whenever you want cause it's 2.30AM") More silence follows. The quiet is accompanied by Antoine's breathing. This 'silent' pause is abruptly broken by two successive high-pitched sounds from the engine's starter.⁹⁶ Ġużeppi's voice is heard over the radio (informing Antoine of the currents and giving instructions on how the net needs to be laid and in which direction). A layering of sounds suggests a hive of activity and as the radio conversation continues to unfold these sounds gain amplitude and the rhythm increases. Antoine shouts an order and there's a marked progression towards a more chaotic situation; voices talk over each other sometimes echoing each other, occasional mechanical sounds are very pronounced while the rhythm is dominated by the loud croaking sound of floats running through the winch and steady counting by one of the fishermen on deck. Each number is accompanied by a metallic sliding sound. As the counting progresses a sound of water raining down from the nets onto the deck dominates

96 One can read further into the metaphorical implications arising from the juxtaposition of breathing and the 'coming to life' of the engine especially when considered in the context of the progressive speeding of the rhythm in the sequence that follows.

the soundscape. Occasional voices are heard (Gūzeppi laughing) until all sounds fade into the dripping water.

Throughout *Men leaving port at night and the light they carry* and the sound piece for *Dal-Baħar Madwarha* the boat is used as a device to situate the public within a multi-layered environment characterised by multiplicity and fluidity. As I have shown above, these characteristics are consistently evoked – both literally (through the choice of subject matter, the materiality of the audio-visual record and the editing structure) and metaphorically (largely through associative and/or dissonant montage and the engagement of haptic sound and images) – to create a perceptual experience that relates the complexity of the fishermen’s experience and my own emplacement on the *Joan of Arc*.

3.3 The Place

3.3.1 A fishing village

In this section I will explore the ways I engaged with the idea of place by focusing on (i) ‘descriptions’ of the physical qualities of my field of study and (ii) immersion as a sensory experience informed by my direct experience of land, sea and the boats particularly the *Joan of*



Arc. My writing about place and emplacement is directly influenced by the kind of physical labour, the tacit knowledge and the physical conditions tied to the Lampara fishing process, and the particularities of the lifestyle of all involved in this process.

I will start by briefly discussing the opening sequence in *Men leaving port at night and the light they carry* and then proceed to detail the evolution of my photographic process that led to the images in the extended photo-essay titled *Lampara II*.

Adopting a materialist approach to my making process, I explain how sensory engagement transformed my fieldwork, my knowledge of the fishermen and the places they inhabit. In dissecting the pieces I made through my research I show how phenomenological concerns with immersion and reflexivity influenced the structuring of my artefacts and their correspondence with Chamber's idea of the Mediterranean as a fluid archive and Fabre's image of the palimpsest. The creative use of multiplicity, repetition and rupture (amongst other narrative devices) is not only a strategy informed by Sarah Pink's writings about the kind of knowledge produced through multi-sensory ethnography but also, as already amply highlighted in previous chapters, by the way human and non-human subjects interact and form ecologies of emotions and psycho-geographies.

Men leaving port at night and the light they carry is a film assembled out of family archive film footage and photographs as well as my recordings of various stages in the fishing trip and process. The film follows a linear narrative arc in that it takes us from port to fishing ground to the hauling of the fish aboard in a successive step-by-step show of the Lampara fishing trip. In this section I discuss the opening of the film as an establishing sequence that provides an overview of Marsaxlokk.

The film opens with a twenty second sequence of the port, the main quay and the church towering over the more humble buildings lining the village shore. The quality of the image (desaturated and monochromatic colours, grainy, soft and jittery) points at the employment of old recording technology. The unstable image and panning of the camera together with the object (possibly a finger) interfering in the composition at the top left hand corner reveal an inexperienced handling of the equipment. This quality and the presence of the filmmaker that reveals him/herself through interference, 'error' and quirks in the filming process pointed me to the potential of self-indexing techniques within the filmic medium as a way to further the public's engagement with the subject as a first-person narrative.



Kon Tiki, (1950)
Heyerdahl

Making the presence of the filmmaker *felt* through the medium, irrespective of whether it is intentionally absorbed as part of the artifice in filmmaking (like in parts of *Chronique d'un été*, Morin and Rouch, 1961) or through lack of skills or means (like *Kon Tiki*, Heyerdahl, 1950) adds a degree of veracity to the film as an eye-witness record of real events. The image on screen gains legitimacy because the filmmaker is directly involved, he is there to see and record and more importantly, he is at one with his film, his record of the experience, the event, the place, the people.

It is safe to guess that the intention of the person filming this twenty second sequence was to make a record of the village through a wide, distant, shot.

My decision to start the film *Men leaving port at night and the light they carry* with found footage showing a panoramic take of the village was intended as a nod to traditional ethnographic methods that commence with a broad survey of the field. However, by re-using this brief survey of the fishing village into my own film I am effectively highlighting the medium's potential for cross-temporal representations through a process of 're-contextualisation'. In the film the village serves as 'fixed' background to the subsequent sequences



in the first half of the film amply showing the extensive construction development that changed Marsaxlokk over the thirty to forty years (rough guess) period that separates the filming of this first sequence and my own film.

The view presented in the opening sequence of *Men leaving port at night and the light they carry* is picturesque and not unlike sequences you would expect to see in many mainstream documentaries and TV features about Marsaxlokk such as the TV program *Wirt Marsaxlokk*, (translates as Marsaxlokk's Heritage).⁹⁷

The sound that accompanies this twenty-second sequence is a sort of quiet characterised by the hum of the microphone and the wind, the sound of a distant car (seen driving along the quay) and the sound of chickens that seem to be closer to the filmmaker but which are never seen. The low two-storey buildings, the towering parish church, the sea, the boats and the accompanying sounds have an idyllic feel to them.

These same sounds continue as the image switches to the title slide and a very faint mechanical sound starts creeping into the soundscape.

⁹⁷ This was a TV program shown on the national television station TVM2, 2018-2019. (www.tvm.com.mt)



A child's voice breaks the relative silence together with the sound of a church bell and the now very audible grunting engine.

Reading in between the layers of the sequence I just described (00:00-00:40) one notes that the source of key sounds that mark this sequence are hidden from view. We do not see the birds or the crowing cockerel. We do not see the bells, nor the children or the engine(s). This led me to speculate on how the crude quality of the sound recording reflects the texture of the image shown and the inexperienced handling of the camera and how this in itself constituted a form of continuum, a complex multisensory perceptual semiotic experience akin to my own emplacement during fieldwork. I will explore this further in the next chapter when I discuss the notions of sensescape and the city symphony genre and how they inform multimedia non-fiction storytelling.

3.3.2 Shooting in the dark

As inferred in chapter two above, during the first years of my fieldwork, I had been frustrated by the difficulty of shooting either stills or video at night in near total darkness in a continuously moving environment (the movement of the sea combined with the constant shake of the



boat that comes from the engines and generator).⁹⁸

The piece for *Dal-Baħar Madwarha* made me aware of the suggestive and immersive capabilities of sound as a medium that could ‘pierce’ through the darkness. However, I was still asking; how can I shoot? How can I give shape to the shadows moving in a hive of activity around me at night?

Pushing the camera’s ISO to 3200 wasn’t successful. Shooting with higher ISO levels produced too much ‘noise’ and I felt that the noise took attention away from the subject of the image to the surface qualities. This was further accentuated by the softening of the image that higher ISOs tend to produce.⁹⁹ As my research has shown, this was of course a very narrow way of thinking about documentary photography and I needed to look beyond the illustrative faculties of photography.

The question I needed to be asking was; what is it like to be there – out

⁹⁸ I also suffer from a medical condition called *Essential familial tremor* which makes it the more difficult to stabilise the camera.

⁹⁹ This is camera specific and some newer cameras perform much better. I shoot on Nikon D610 and Nikon 700 bodies launched in 2013 and 2008 respectively. These are cameras I had chosen for their sturdiness and their good performance in low-light condition.

at sea on the deck of a small fishing boat with seven men laying and hauling nets - when all lights are off? This turns the question from the subject back onto me as the author. I realised that my understanding of these moments was much more layered and complex than just capturing the action on board. Having spent so much time on the boat I had acquired an intimate knowledge of the space, the fishing process and the mood aboard.

What could the *Dal-Baħar Madwarha* piece reveal about the nature of my immersion with the fishermen and consequently, how could this sound piece inform my photographic practice?

Eventually, I started experimenting with a combination of high ISOs (mostly 1600) and long exposures. This produced a dark digital negative which I would later push process. Through this process I could reveal the 'shadows' of the men at work while retaining a degree of control on the amount of grain and noise levels in the image.¹⁰⁰

100 I had spent years working with a similar processing process when I used to shoot on slide film where I would set my camera light meter at ISO1600, shoot on ISO400 film and then push process by two stops in the darkroom. I had employed this process when shooting at the *Malta Drydocks* (2005) and when shooting my project *The Priest's visit* (2003-2005, 2012).



Adapting digital image processing and shooting techniques to the specificity of the subject provided me with additional means to reflect on and refine my creative approach to non-fiction storytelling. The conditions of work meant that I had to find new ways of taking a picture in the dark and the solution was within the medium itself. This doggedness to work solely with whatever light was available as against using external light sources eventually paid off.¹⁰¹

Rediscovering material and visual qualities of the photograph that I had previously neglected, ignored or actively avoided gave new scope to my work. These 'newfound' aesthetic possibilities led me to focus my attention on the relationship between the materiality of the image and its haptic capacity. The resulting dark, grainy, evocative images bring to the fore the artifice in the making of these photographs. The viewing public is no longer confronted by a tightly framed capture from real life that expunges all trace of mediation between subject and author (not to mention the exhibition hall, the book or any other space where the work is shown). Instead he/she are confronted by a multi-layered transparent image that shows the subject of study as well as

¹⁰¹ Earlier I experimented with a small LED headlamp but it proved to be too conspicuous, unpractical to wear or carry in an environment where it is best to have at least one hand free to be able to hold onto something and avoid falling overboard. The fishermen also hated it because it shone too strongly into their dark-accustomed eyes.



my response to it as the interpreter of what I 'came-to-see' and the kind of truth I forged out of that.

Pushing the limitations of the photographic medium, I was enthralled by the evocative and affective qualities that came to the fore and which allowed me to draw the public closer to my fieldwork experience as a reflexive process. Greater attention was given to the materiality which bestowed the image with a heightened sense of tactility. How does this haptic dimension contribute to enhancing the public's engagement with the subject and to what effect? How does materiality affect our sense of proximity and empathic response? What if these and other similar questions were asked in relation to sound recording and the production of audio-documentaries, soundscapes, podcasts or audio-visual installations?

The above line of questioning shows how during the course of my research my behaviour as a photographer shifted from a passive observational one to an embedded role. It betrays an *a priori* understanding of fieldwork as a nuanced holistic experience. The documentary is no longer thought of as a finite encapsulation of reality but rather as an open tentative rendering of the experience of fieldwork. By extension my methodology had shifted from thinking about the photograph to thinking about the photographic as an



extension of my embodied experience and emplaced practice. Most notably the materiality of the image seemed to demand that I pay closer attention to the broader human sensorium, the mechanics of perception and the generation of emotion as essential to decoding the complex semiotic system that constituted my experience with the fishermen. This shift led to a marked development in my way of thinking about non-fiction storytelling and the aesthetic strategies to explore in the poetic representation of lived experience.

3.3.3 A photographic essay

The photographs I will be describing in the following paragraphs constitute the early experiments and works I did for the *Lampara II* photographic essay (See Appendix 2). The photographs were mostly shot during a particular part of the fishing process when most of the lights are off. This is the part during which nets are released, laid and hauled and is considered to be the most stressful stage of the fishing trip. The men need to focus, work hard and make sure that they are working in synch with each other. The captain has to evaluate the information relayed to him from the small boat carrying the main lamp and decide accordingly at what speed and in which direction to lay the nets all the while keeping the three boats (main, tug and lamp) and the crew co-ordinated. This part usually lasts from anything



in between one hour to around two hours or more. The duration depends on the sea and weather conditions, the quantity of the catch and any technical difficulties that might arise. It is dark and the environment is tense.

As a photographer this is the most challenging time to work on the boat not only because of the dangers and difficulties in moving around the space but because you need to be sensitive to the mood aboard and how the process is unfolding. During this time there are three relatively safe places on the main boat where to shoot from; a tight corner right behind the bridge, in the bridge itself or on top of it. A fourth possible place where to shoot from is the small boat with the main lamp but given its small size this boat is more subject to the swell of the sea. One can also stand on the bow but the visible activity there is limited to the pulling of the anchor. However the bow is the best place from where to listen to (and record) the communication between the captain and the other boats without getting in the way of the men at work.

In addition, the total darkness in which the work is carried out practically bars you from taking any photographs anywhere on the boat and it is this that led me to experiment with different photographic processes.



The images mostly show the men, individually or in groups, at work on the *Joan of Arc*. Men pulling nets, tying ropes and operating machinery on the stern and the starboard (right) side of the boat dominate the majority of these pictures. The faces of the men are hardly ever recognisable or shown and the human figure is often reduced to an ethereal silhouette moving in a space which is mostly defined by nets, ropes, poles and winches. Sky and sea act as a backdrop but are hardly ever clearly distinguishable or recognisable. On the whole the images are densely composed arrangements where men, fishing gear and boat are hardly distinguishable from each other.

What became immediately evident since the beginning of the experimentation was that the fixed inanimate structures (rigging, ropes, winches, etc) on the boat started to become more and more important as framing/compositional devices. I had not predicted this 'happy accident' and I was excited to explore this quality further. This is also extremely important from a metaphorical point of view where men and their space of work seem to become one.

The duration of the exposure or rather, more specifically the movement of the figures at the time of exposure reduces the figures to ghost-like organic shapes. On the other hand the structures provide a contrasting geometric set-up to the fleeting scenes of toil.



Taught ropes, metal railings, or the shimmer of wet pleats of the net being hauled high above the stern break with the symmetry of the horizontal and vertical edges of the picture frame creating very dynamic compositions. The eye navigates between this irregular web of criss-crossing lines searching for the subject of the picture only to be met by weightless transient figures and hints of limbs moving in the enveloping darkness.

At times the image is dominated by a rhythmic repetition of shapes, lines and identifiable objects like flood lights or the men working in line. In other photographs the eye is led into pictorial space by a dominant diagonal line that takes off from the foreground and moves to a point of convergence in the background or out of the picture frame. Triangular shapes dominate and this is mostly due to the guy ropes and cables attached to the pole at the centre of the deck.

The limited ambient light is mostly coming from the tiny LED signalling light that is attached to the buoy marking the end of the net and which is fished out of the water immediately after the laying of the net (the net is released in a circular form) and is put in the corner behind the bridge. As the men are in a haste to pull the purse-line they leave the light flashing on deck and this presents an opportunity



for me to exploit this little source of light. Light coming from the main lamp on the smaller boat is another source that helps model the figures emerging through the darkness. During the pulling of the purse line this light is kept at the edge of the net (the furthest possible distance from the boat while remaining inside the net circle marked by the float line) so as to keep the fish away from the still open parts of the net underwater. At times additional lighting is 'provided' by distant lights from other nearby boats, merchant ships and oil tankers, and light pollution coming from land.

Generally speaking these images show two types of lighting. The first is a selective kind of spot lighting where contrast is relatively high while the second is a more even type of lighting showing limited tonal range. The latter are images that result from the darkest or 'blank' negatives. In high-contrast images the saturation of the colours is much higher and hues are warmer (red, oranges and ochres) than in other images. The darkness combined with intense colours and figures in movement within a dynamic composition give the 'scenes' a stage like character that is reminiscent of Baroque works. Moreover the graininess and the resulting loss of sharpness add to the painterly qualities of the photographs.

The organic quality of these images helped me understand better not only the haptic qualities of the photographic image but also the potential that an experimental audiovisual practice has for sensory engagement. In other words, the evolution of my photography from detached observational recording to a more embodied practice that acknowledges, embraces and valorises the physical challenges of the field of work has helped me to develop works that better reflect my own emplacement with the fishermen.

In this chapter I described the making of my pieces and tried to explain how my practice evolved as a response to my experimentation with photography, film and sound and how this process helped me gain a deeper understanding of the sensory ecology in which I was embedded. I have shown how by associating experimental practices with the experiential I became increasingly aware of the way the individual's perception is determined by his/her socio-cultural background and personal experiences. In summary, I tried to address the challenges posed by contingent, incomplete and complex meaning-making structures and how as a storyteller I addressed these challenges by devising narrative strategies to engage the public in a reflexive process that yielded some insight in the experiences of Maltese fishermen.

REFLECTING

PART FOUR

Introduction

In my previous chapters I explored the idea of knowledge making as a consequence of relational activity (see Part I: *Positioning*) that corresponds with the concept of the Mediterranean as a living archive (see Part II: *Framing*) and the ethnographic method as experiential journeying (see Part III: *Making*). In the following pages I look back at my experimental non-fiction storytelling practice and the representational challenges in documentary making posed by the way socio-cultural frameworks contribute to sensory perception and interpretation.

My reflection starts with a critical re-evaluation of my methodological approach to fieldwork as an emplaced learning experience on and around the *Joan of Arc*. In rearticulating the participatory and collaborative aspects of my research method, I reiterate my commitment to interdisciplinary and collaborative methods of audiovisual production as a counter strategy to reductionist narratives of Maltese fishermen.

My reflections on the motivations behind grand narratives of Mediterranean unity and subsequent rejection of Mediterraneanist projects (as articulated by Herzfeld) constitute the ideological backbone of my ethnographic approach. Adopting a participatory and collaborative methodology was an attempt to redress the often-unstated asymmetrical power dynamics between researcher and informant in the acquisition, construction and distribution of knowledge. This approach to fieldwork helped me to reorient my practice from the objective observational methods associated with traditional photographic documentary conventions to more organic and diverse forms of storytelling that favour speculative modes of representation.

Re-positioning myself from detached photographer to apprentice crew member was perhaps the most drastic move I made in the course of my research as embedded learner and also the most emphatic gesture of my commitment to collaboration with the fishermen. This direct engagement necessitates a broad reflective framework for analysing my practice as a situated exploration of plausible configurations of identity. It demands that the way I collected, organised and interpreted information be measured equally against the physical, psychological and intellectual capabilities, habits and limitations of my own body and that of my collaborators. This also entails a careful consideration of how the circulation of material objects within the very specific environment of my case study contribute to sensory perception and interpretation of lived experience as identity.

In my understanding of emplacement as a synergetic experience between body, mind and environment, the socio-cultural framework cannot be considered as a separate signifying system of reference but is integral to the sense making process as a relational whole. This is what led me to explore more Sarah Pink's multisensory approach to ethnography over the kind of anthropology of the senses as proposed by David Howes where each of the senses is considered as a separate faculty. Howes binds the idea of emplacement to the notion of 'sensescapes' which he describes as, "the idea that the

experience of the environment, and of the other persons and things which inhabit that environment, is produced by the particular mode of distinguishing, valuing and combining the senses in the culture under study” (Howes, 2005, p.143). The suggestion that each culture has a specific, hierarchically organised, sensorium conflicts with the way I articulated the formation of knowledge in the previous chapters as an ecological relational process.

Much has been written about the correlated notions of emplacement and embodiment particularly in the context of ethnographic studies that focus on situated practices and identities (see for example Pink, 2009 and Degen and Rose, 2012).¹⁰² My interest in the use of the term sensescapes lies in its ability to provoke creative reflection on the psychogeographies that ethnographers come to inhabit through their research and the ways that this sensitivity to the environmental conditions of their fieldwork impinges on their narratives of identities. I allude to this repeatedly through my writing in the thesis, particularly in reference to Giuliana Bruno’s notion of architexture (section 1.5) and the concept of the symphonic as discussed in chapter

102 Howes uses the term ‘sensescapes’ in the third part of his *Empire of the Senses: the sensual culture reader*, under the title *Sensescapes: Sensation in a Cultural Context*. This part includes six essays by Constance Classen, Kathryn Linn Geurts, Steven Feld, Dorinne Kondo, Marina Roseman and Lisa Law. (Howes (Ed.), 2005, pp.143-244)

three.

In the coming three sections I reflect on the notion of emplacement as an overarching influence in the way (i) I developed my research methodology, (ii) interpreted the fishermen's sense of identity and (iii) on the works I produced.

In the first section, *On Research* I reflect on why I adopted a multisensory ethnographic approach as my research method. Focusing on my long-standing collaborative relationship with the fishermen I reflect on the conditions of situated learning and the multidimensionality of fieldwork. In my reflection I closely examine il-Glawd's diaries and try to tease out how the man's sense of self relates to the socio-cultural-environmental network that he documents.

In the second section, *On Storytelling* I extend this reflection on the constitution of identity to analyse the particularity of fishing as a way of life and the distinctive qualities of the spatio-temporality in which fishermen develop their sense of self. In so doing I also engage with a discourse on multimedia storytelling and how it relates to notions of place, memory and imagination as 'contexts' through which the experience is mediated.

In the final section of this chapter, *On Interpretation* I reflect on how in my storytelling I employed the multidimensionality of sensory ethnography to interpret my situated learner experience with Maltese fishermen. I also reflect on how I addressed narrative and authorial issues through the creation of multimedia storytelling environments.

4.1 On Research

4.1.1 Maltese fishermen and the sensory ethnographic approach

As I have proposed in this thesis a fisherman's sense of self evolves through a process that combines direct experience, participation and adaptation. In my fieldwork I tried to emulate that process by, amongst other things, undergoing an apprenticeship period aboard a family owned and managed fishing boat, which operates from Marsaxlokk. The participatory aspect of my approach led to years of close collaboration with the fishermen and it is through this long-standing collaboration that I slowly gained insight into this very unique way of life.

My friendship with Ġużeppi and Antoine has rewarded me with care, support and knowledge. Over these years both men gave me time and space to observe, do things, fail, experiment and learn. We have often

sat and spoken about changing lifestyles, fish consumption patterns and how they have adapted their work in accordance to new market demands and regulatory policies. I have also got to understand better these men through their family archives, the biographic-historical account in il-Glawd's diaries, the way they spoke about their personal relations and their willingness to share private matters with me.

In the early stages of my project, the critical framework, which I developed to evaluate and interpret my experience and research, was one that draws from affective theory and the way different parts of an ecology relate and yield possible meanings.

Sarah Pink's sensory ethnography provided a sophisticated model for analysing my research process of joining fishermen on their fishing trips, and the way I internalised and interpreted the conditions that shaped my experience over the years through embodied practice. Pink proposes an ethnography that bridges the theory and practice dichotomy, which I discuss in chapter one, through a methodology that 'acknowledges' the agency of the researcher in the field¹⁰³ and

103 There is a parallel discourse to this in documentary studies about the degree of intervention, interference and self-indexing of the documentary maker's (and his/her crew) role. (see for example Nichols, 2017, p.20, p.132, p.135; Gaudenzi, 2013, pp.33-34)

the subsequent subjectivity that arises from experiential learning (Pink, 2009, p.2). Sensory ethnography is particularly pertinent to the research of the environment of Mediterranean fishermen as it brings fresh scholarship to the study of perception and the senses as primary sources of knowledge. This is key to understanding and interpreting the kind of tacit knowledge that is at the core of a fisherman's sense of self.

Pink draws on Tim Ingold's writings and his influences particularly Maurice Merleau Ponty's phenomenology of perception and James Gibson's ecological psychology to argue for an understanding of "the senses as not simply interconnected, but as part of a system in which they are not so easily distinguishable" (Pink, 2011, pp.266-268). Underlining the need for an ethnographic re-orientation towards accounts based on the interrelationships of the senses she distances herself from studies that separate, isolate or privilege different sensory modalities. Instead Pink proposes that ethnographers engage with a theory of sensory perception informed by a "phenomenology of place and the politics of space" (Pink, 2009, p.23). This positioning broadens considerably the ethnographer's remit as emplaced learner.

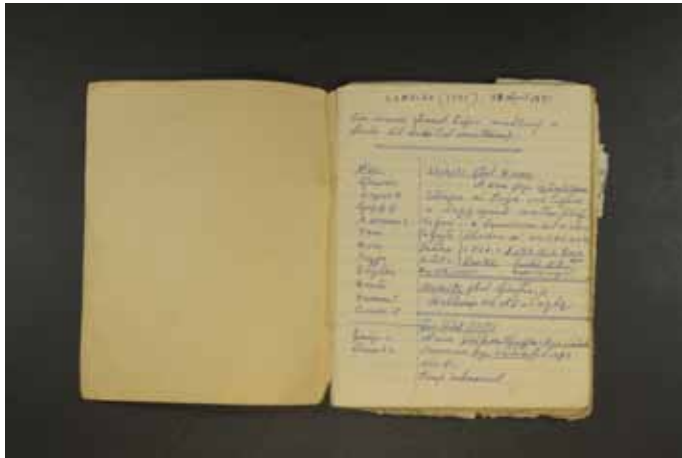
Pink's concept is a synergistic approach to the multidimensionality of fieldwork. Informed by phenomenological thinking, sensory

ethnography can serve as a provocation for non-fiction storytellers to think about their practice as a reflexive exercise in perceptual semiotics. This exercise is based on the critical exploration of how sensory stimuli, tacit knowledge and the storyteller's own previous personal experiences resonate or conflict with each other. In the preceding chapters I have tried to show how I creatively exploited these relational dynamics and tensions to create immersive works as sites where the formative process overrides the prescriptive formulation of knowledge.

How does my storytelling align or conflict with the experiences of fishermen? What kind of connections did I choose to follow? Which connections did I miss and which did I ignore? Why and to what effect? As a practitioner these are basic but essential questions.

In reflecting on my storytelling decisions I ask; how does il-Glawd choose to relate his experiences? What do his writings reveal about his priorities, motivations, desires, preoccupations, frustrations, character, relations, skills, ...? How did il-Glawd understand his being in the world?

The majority of il-Glawd's entries follow a clear structure where information is organised in sections. Each entry documents a fishing



trip. At the top of the entry is the date. The participating crew members are listed in a narrow column on one side with another broader column reserved for a short descriptive paragraph. Following under these two sections are the ‘accounts’.

The list of crew members is organised in a hierarchical order with il-Glawd being the first on the list, followed by his sons’ names and then non-family members. At the top of this list he writes the number of people engaged and the amount of shares into which the profits need to be distributed. At the bottom, separated by a thin line, he lists the names of other individual fishermen who were fishing independently but were ‘enrolled’ as extra effort/support whilst out at sea.¹⁰⁴

104 It was common practice that individual fishermen who had the right set-up such as a ‘lamp’ for attracting fish and who would be fishing for pelagic fish with a line and hook (referred to as ‘tax-xliief’) would be called to join forces with the *Joan of Arc* (or other bigger vessels) and share their fishing grounds (and fish) and efforts. The larger boat would then lay the net around two, three or more such boats. In return each boat would be generally paid the equivalent of two shares; one share for the individual and one share for the boat and equipment used. This practice lasted approximately until the end of the 70s but as yet I have not managed to confirm the exact date of termination. This information about the distribution of shares that il-Glawd documents and corroborated by various other sources including Ġanni (a.k.a. id-Daħna) who had worked as both deckhand on the *Joan of Arc* and who later worked independently with his own *Luzzu*.



Ġanni a.k.a. id-Dahna
with il-Glawd at the bow
of the *Joan of Arc*

This list, organised in descending order, replicates the hierarchical structure of authority/command on a boat.

In describing each fishing trip, he notes the boats used, the hour of departure and return from and to port or fish market, the general weather conditions, the rising and setting of the moon,¹⁰⁵ the direction, strength and variability of the wind, the chosen fishing grounds, the direction and strength of sea currents, the number of times (mostly once or twice) the net was laid and the type of fish observed under the boats and the size of the catch they netted.

In the 'accounts' section il-Glawd lists the expenses including mostly the cost of fuel for each of the boats and the paraffin for running the lights mounted on the boats, and the cost of ice bought for keeping the fish fresh. Other common 'running' costs included the 'hiring' of a van when necessary and the cost of stone slabs used for the anchoring of 'ċimi' (transl. 'polystyrene floats with which palm fronds are tied') during the Lampuki season. On another side of the page he follows a set 'formula' starting with the amount of income from sales, deduces the commission of the middlemen and the running costs and then calculates the remaining amount to be shared amongst himself and 105 This applies only to Lampara fishing trips. Other criteria apply for Lampuki (Dorado/Mahi mahi) or Pixxispad (Swordfish) fishing.

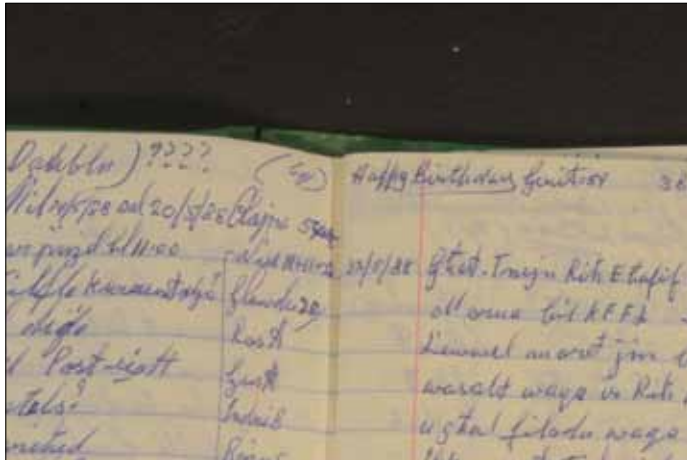


the crew. This section applies only to fish sold at the official fish market managed by the fisheries department.

At times a further third 'section' is reserved for direct sales where fish is sold directly to fish hawkers without the involvement of a middleman or governmental institutions. These were mostly fishermen's wives and family members who would go around towns and villages selling a crate or two of fish from 'pushchairs' (repurposed baby strollers). These fish hawkers were extremely popular and considered very important for the sale of fish by fishermen themselves as is attested to by the frequent reference to them that fishermen make in their complaints of declining sales. These sellers were eventually phased out by EU health and safety regulations that required sellers to have refrigerated vehicles, running water and such amenities.¹⁰⁶

In the top margins, il-Glawd adds occasional personal notes such as his wife and kids' birthdays, anniversaries and other life events such as the passing, marriage or birth of someone in the family. In the bottom margins he often wrote notes about other boats, rival fishermen and their catch, current issues with or between crew members, accidents (like the breakages or the loss of equipment, people getting hurt, etc),

¹⁰⁶ For further reading about the role of women in fishing communities see Prieto, 2016, p.19, p.21.

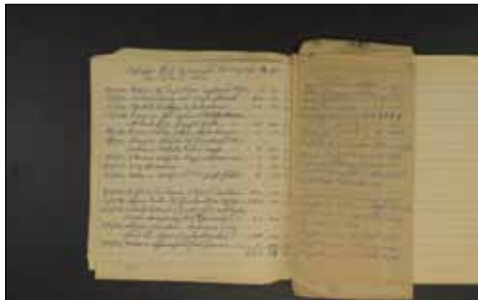
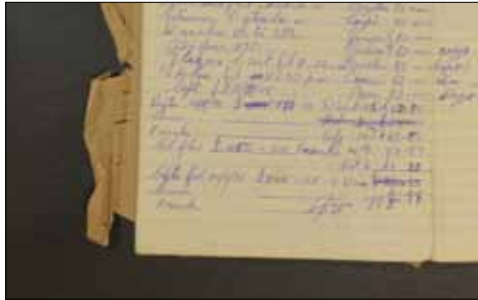


25th May 1988
Note reads:
Happy birthday Gerit = 59

political events of national importance (he was a staunch Labour party supporter and was an active member of the Marsaxlokk Labour party club) and other minor events not necessarily directly related to the fishing trip. These marginalia are often the most revealing about il-Glawd's moods and emotions. In expressing or emphasising his observations, he uses question marks instead of exclamation marks.

Il-Glawd's choice of structure acted as a basic model from which I could develop a critical reflection on my situated learner experience and explore the limitations of my research. Il-Glawd's experiences helped me to contextualise fishermen's experiences within a broader setting than that which I had initially imagined. It became apparent that the fishermen's knowledge of, sensitivity to and dependence on climactic conditions and the dynamics of kinship, seniority and the exercise of power on a boat were only part of the experience of fishing. A holistic account meant I needed to take account of the fishermen's skills, labour and feelings as part of a broader socio-economic-technological environment that included the sale, distribution and consumption of fish and evolving technologies, amongst other things.

The structural analysis of il-Glawd's writings served as an important reference to map the breadth of interconnected subjects that constitute my field of study. The content of the actual writings as



well as the material qualities of the diaries themselves revealed complex and diverse types of information. Il-Glawd's writings provided a wide array of both quantitative 'data' as well as qualitative information. Whilst my interest lay primarily in the latter I could not discount the importance of the first. My conversations with Ġużeppi, Antoine and other fishermen repeatedly turned to questions about the sustainability of fishing as a livelihood. Such subjects included changing climatic/seasonal patterns, fluctuating fish stocks such as catch size and type, sales and prices, operational costs of a boat, fishermen's income, technological advancements and changes in policy, amongst others.¹⁰⁷

Il-Glawd's fishing trip entries were personal narratives that expanded beyond the confines of the boat and its operations. Lengthier passages in his diaries shed light on his own story, character and 'self-assumed' social role. In his 'yearly reports', letters to newspaper editors or the meticulously documented informal arrangements, contract and extended conflict with the builders of the *Joan of Arc* il-Glawd often expresses feelings of frustration, anger and mistrust. These feelings can be seen as an expression of high expectations, an almost autocratic streak and evidence of his ambitious character. These traits
107 For further reference see *Cast adrift in a sea of challenges: perspectives from Maltese fishers* (2019, 10:51mins) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8ieaTeLFtE>



Ġużeppi's interview in
*Cast adrift in a sea of challenges:
perspectives from Maltese fishers,
2019.*

were echoed in the conversations and interviews I had with family members and past crew members.

4.1.2 Long term immersion, habituation and bias

Seven years ago, I had very little experience of being on a fishing boat, no knowledge of Lampara fishing and no relations in Marsaxlokk. I only travelled with a camera and a desire to explore. In the previous chapter I explored how I adapted to the experience of being aboard a fishing vessel and how repeating the experience transformed my sensory sensibilities. These transformations were not only physical, but also changed the way I perceived, internalised and interpreted information.

Against this background I ask – what have I lost in this long-term familiarisation and learning process? What have I become desensitised to? These questions demand that I look closer at notions of habituation (or habituated response) and perceptual narrowing to check my research for any omissions and biases.

To my understanding the issue of habituation requires that I backtrack a little and revisit the early stages of my fieldwork as detailed earlier in this thesis.

In my first meetings with Ġużeppi and Antoine and during the first seasons of going fishing with them, I assumed the role of ‘acceptable incompetent’ (Nigel Fieldman in Gilbert and Stoneman (Eds.), 2016, p.149). By adopting an unassuming demeanour I gave way to my own (real) naïveté in order to ask difficult and at times impertinent questions about family feuds, professional rivalries and ‘tricks’ or secrets of the trade. This strategy changed as the years went by and along the way I gained the trust of the family and started to be considered as an insider.¹⁰⁸ Nurturing this relationship was key to the collaborative spirit of my research particularly because of the work environment in which I was embedded but also, as I will show in the following pages, because of the culture of ‘secrecy’ that exists in fishing communities.

108 At a public lecture I gave about my research at the University of Malta (January 13th 2020) I had invited the whole family to attend and share the floor with me. One member from the floor asked the family about how they see or consider me and Judith (Ġużeppi’s wife, Antoine’s mother) said that they consider me as part of the family now. She also underlined that I was ‘genuine’, down to earth and they felt that they could trust me. This was also something that Guzeppi and Antoine told me when I expressed a desire to buy a boat. Both men questioned the logic of my statement by asking why I should think about buying a boat when “we” had so many (family boats) at our disposal.

Eric Laurer emphasises the importance of keeping a record of the early stages of fieldwork experience. He says that these early observations constitute the records of a 'lay person' whose experience is akin to that of the research's prospective audience;

Without keeping a record of your own struggles to get 'the knowledge' you are likely to forget the lay member's perspective once you no longer have it. Consequently you will no longer appreciate what it is that may seem odd, irrational or otherwise mysterious to those, like yourself, now in the know. (Laurer in Clifford and Valentine (Eds.), 2003, p.136)

Records of my first experiences in the field reflected inexperience, struggle and awe to working in a new environment that included being at sea, fishing with others and moving within the confines of an operational boat. In other words the material I created then, were that of a 'dis-habituated' engagement with the fishing experience. For example, my photographs and videos from the first two seasons working aboard the *Joan of Arc* consistently showed my awe at the natural beauty of the environment particularly the light at sunset and sunrise and its play on the water and the horizon. I also photographed



Photographs from the
23rdAugust2014

extensively the swarming schools of fish that gather when the boat is anchored and the lights from the *Joan of Arc* are on. Similarly the formality of videoed interviews which I had conducted with Guzeppi, Judith and Antoine after the first season reflected a distance and unfamiliarity that still existed between me and the family.

Colleagues with no or limited experience of fishing proved to be important in providing valuable insights into my work, providing critical questions about aspects in my research process that I have neglected over the years. The most frequent question I was asked was “What kind of fish do you catch?” What now looks to me as an extremely obvious question to ask, was one aspect of the fishermen’s work which I failed to document and explain. In other words, I failed to show the fish and highlight the distinguishing qualities between the different types of fish caught by the Lampara method such as types of Mackerel, Shad, and Bogue.

Other general comments referred to the way I was privileging the fishing process (see *Lampara I*, Appendix 1) and emphasising the men’s labour during the night over the broader experience of being on a boat. In so doing it could be said I overlooked qualities, phases or moments of the fishing trip such as the waiting and resting periods during which the fishing crew socialised, performed menial tasks and

slept.

These critical comments led me to question my experience as a practitioner working across the fields of fine art and documentary making. My engagement with the art world dates back well over twenty years during which I experimented with various forms and produced works for very diverse audiences and contexts. I also had the privilege of developing an appreciation and a critical approach to both my practice and the works of others. However, my engagement with people who are not steeped in the arts or who have limited or no interest in creative or academic work exposed the limitations of such a perspective. My collaboration with the fishermen eventually led me to reconceptualise my storytelling in relation to a broader spectrum of the public.

I also considered potential issues of 'perceptual narrowing' as described by Jackson (2018, pp.57-58) in his explanation of sensory perception as an experience that draws on physiological, neurological and cultural factors. Jackson, citing Lewkowicz and Ghazanfar (2009), describes how developing infants adopt a selective perceptual process that prevents them from being overwhelmed by surrounding stimuli. This selectivity is important to my project especially because the primary site of my fieldwork is so dense with powerful sensory stimuli

particularly those related to smell, sound and sight, and the way they are interrelated with the movement of the boat/sea. During the first fishing season of my research I struggled with the loudness of the engine and generator sounds. This was even more problematic when I first started to test-edit the first footage I shot during this early period. The constant rambling in my headphones throughout that one week when I was editing was nothing short of an excruciating experience. Seven years later, when I sit down to edit similar footage I rarely take notice of that same sound.

As Jackson points out, this selectivity constitutes a form of ordering of the senses that reflects the 'acculturation' (*ibid.* p.58) process that is determined by the specific environmental conditions in which a group of people live, work or socialise.¹⁰⁹ Whilst as I underline above I have had direct experience of perceptual narrowing during the course of my fieldwork, I must admit that I feel a certain unease at the idea of an ordered sensorium. My unease stems from the way this sensory ordering seems to challenge the view that the senses are, as Pink argues, almost indistinguishable. While this does not reduce any of the merit of (multi)sensory ethnography and its use to non-fiction
109 See also *Spelling out Sensations: Reflections on the ways in which the Natural Environment can infiltrate Meaning-Making*, Artaud, 2016.

storytellers Pink herself acknowledges the challenges that the notion of sensory unity poses to multimodal scholarship and multimedia interpretations and vice-versa. In her article *Multimodality, multisensoriality and ethnographic knowing: social semiotics and the phenomenology of perception* (2011) she concludes that sensory ethnographic thinking can help challenge the conventions of multimodal theory and in so doing create a “self-critical and reflexive strand within multimodal analysis” (*ibid.* p.274).

4.2. On storytelling

The study of fishermen and maritime communities has shown that narrating these identities requires a multidisciplinary approach (Siriwardane and Hornidge, 2016; Prieto, 2016; Khakzad and Griffith, 2016; Van Ginkel, 2014, 2008; McGoodwin, 2001; Acheson, 1981; McCay, 1978). The need for multidisciplinary considerations seems to be rooted in the heterogeneity of the field. Quoting a long list of previous studies Siriwardane and Hornidge underline this need as:

Seas and coastlines [are] more than mere resource bases and sites of socio-economic extraction, value and exchange. Seascapes have been perceived as spaces of enskillment and ancestral belonging, as dreamscapes of danger and presence,

and as sites of desire and dwelling, while practices such as voyaging and coasting have historically been interpreted in relational terms, that connected expansive networks of social groups and distant spaces. (2016, p.8)

Similarly, McCay, quoting Vayda, highlights the interrelationship between “environmental variables”, cultural practices, modes of production and resource management (1978, pp.397-398). However, stereotypes about fishing persevere and popular stories about fishermen tend to dispense of this complexity and heterogeneity in favour of finite, formulaic dramatic tales of action and survival. This linear narrative formula has been employed in telling the stories of Maltese fishermen most notably by Lino Psaila who’s book *Il-Baħar rasu iebsa* (translates as, ‘*The hard-headed sea*’) has been in print since 1978 and is currently awaiting the publishing of its fourth edition. Psaila (1943-2017), who for years also worked part-time as a crew member on a number of boats from Marsaxlokk, draws on real-life events for his depiction of fishermen’s experiences. However, his short-stories are dramatic accounts from a bygone era based on the man versus nature model replete with tales of heroism, dare and divine intervention. Psaila’s words contain more than a hint of nostalgia and machismo (Grima, 2003, p.243) and the realities that he writes about, are peopled by characters from a distant past.



Psaila's finite rendition and temporal distancing of his subjects represent some of the concerns which anthropologists have tried to address in their work by recourse to the affective and the sensory. I pursued a heterogeneous, non-linear storytelling form that reflected an embodied/emplaced experience of il-Glawd and his crew, in order to reflect biographies, rich histories and complex social networks inextricably linked to the specific maritime environmental/geographical conditions. I placed emphasis on the personal without decontextualizing this from the social, cultural, historical, economic and geographic realities that are specific to Marsaxlokk and the broader Maltese context.

Through my research, I became aware that 'distance' was inherent to the conditions of fishing (and of being a fisherman). One aspect that distinguishes fishermen from land-based workers is the kind of physical displacement that their job entails. The 'man against nature' narrative model is not limited to fishermen's stories but also to stories about farmers and hunter-gatherers. However there are crucial differences between these different occupations that one needs to attend to (Prieto, 2016, p.20; Acheson, 1981, p.276). Being out at sea, physically detached from land, has strong symbolic value in both the way fishermen perceive themselves and also in the

way landlubbers perceive them. This 'distancing' often limits the fishermen's participation in the cultural life of their place of origin, their representation in local politics and also the way they interact within their own family units (McGoodwin, 2001, 2.5; Acheson, 1981, p.277).¹¹⁰

Beyond the frequent absence away from home and social affairs as a consequence of being at sea, equally important and a highly valued aspect to such distancing – is a sense of autonomy, freedom and independence that is often cited as a main reason for engaging with fishing and dedicating their lives to it even when the financial return does not match the effort and hours put in the activity.¹¹¹ (McGoodwin, 2001, 2.5) At times, the combination of low-social interaction and precarious economic situation contribute further to the distancing (if not outright ostracizing of) the fishermen from the rest of the community. These factors contribute to the mystification

110 One of the reasons why fishermen in Malta struggle to organize themselves efficiently is that they hardly manage to have regular meetings namely because they are often out at sea or busy with maintaining their gear.

111 Low, precarious income (attributed to declining fish sales and consumption, external competition, declining natural resources and stringent restrictions on fishermen) is the source of constant laments from the fishermen. It is also the main reason that career fishermen cite for discouraging younger generation family members to continue in the same line of work.

of the fishermen's image as individualistic, and fiercely independent, inhabiting a liminal spatio-temporality between socio-normative rules and self-determinism.

Against the background to narratives about fishermen which I have just outlined I would like to propose three 'situations' from my research to try to shed some light on the way fishermen perceive and narrate themselves.

Adopting photo-elicitation methods I showed my work to Ġużeppi, Antoine and crew members to solicit feedback about the way I was documenting and interpreting my experience and try to tease out the nuances in the photographs or the films presented. I asked my collaborators *why* they liked or disliked a particular image over another and this proved revelatory particularly in terms of identification with or the emotional engagement or lack of thereof with the subject matter, the form and the structure of the storytelling. Another approach was sitting with individual fishermen and paying close attention to the way they introduced or referred to photographs (and at times, videos) in our conversation.

This mode of listening and reflecting was particularly fruitful when talking to Ġużeppi and Antoine. As my closest collaborators and the

persons with whom I have the longest and strongest relationship, they felt comfortable in openly expressing their ideas about my work.

One example was a series of photographs of the moment when the purse wire of the net is drawn and the fish (namely Allis Shad)¹¹² start to jump out of the water producing a boiling frenzy of activity on the surface of the water enclosed within the floatline. In the order of the fishing process this moment can be considered as a sort of climax that follows the tension prior to laying the net as shown in *A boat at night*. Both men refer to this moment often in their conversations and when I consulted them about the selection of photographs for the Lampara exhibition (2018) this was the first image they asked me to include.¹¹³

Photographs and video clips capturing this moment of the fishing process are charged with emotion. The criss-crossing movement created by the erratic jumping (or flying) of barely-recognisable fish, the splashing of water, the shimmer on agitated water, the warmth and

112 This behaviour is mostly limited to allis shad. Other fish like mackerel and bogue, which are also caught with the same method of fishing, act differently when they are enclosed by the nets.

113 At times when I was away in London Antoine used to show me how well they were doing during their fishing trips by sending me his own pictures of this moment. In a video clip from a fishing trip during which a lot of shad was caught (14th September 2017) Antoine is heard urging me to shoot.



one-point focus provided by the single light source against the dark surroundings, all contribute to the expressive sensorial qualities of the photograph. When shown different photographs of this moment Guzeppi and Antoine both suggested that I choose wide shots that show the breadth of the net rather than opt for the mid-to-close-up images which I thought were better composed and provided a better description of what was happening. This choice was telling in that both fishermen seemed to favour the spectacular over detail and I felt that this could be a reflection of our different experiences and expectations of the fishing process as well as of the photographic medium. Whilst they were more interested in 'big', impactful representations and less interested in showing a process that they know all too well (distressed fish in flights of frenzy when sensing the closing nets), as a novice to the process I was mostly concerned with shooting descriptive images through which I could 'explain' the process to audiences who, like myself at the time, were unfamiliar with fishing.

Underlying Guzeppi and Antoine's choice of photograph I could sense a certain degree of pride in being able to show the significant size of their catch. There is also a degree of pride that both men share in their skills. Antoine often expresses satisfaction (and relief) at laying the net successfully against the odds of changing sea and wind conditions.



Similarly, Ġużeppi is keen on his role as '*capo pesca*' (leader/director of the fishing trip) which involves manning the small boat with the main light, checking wind and current direction and strength, and seeing that enough fish were gathered under the boats' light to make the effort of releasing and hauling of the nets worthwhile.¹¹⁴

The glee with which Ġużeppi describes the circling shoals of mackerel and the palpable joy he gets when fish jump frantically out of the water seems also to have been an emotion shared by other members of the family. In a recorded video interview with Charles Abela (Ġużeppi's brother) the latter describes how *il-Glawd* turned childlike when catching a fish

The thrill stayed with him [with *il-Glawd*, his father]. For example once we went fishing for *Lampuki* and when we caught one ... the *Lampuka* makes a lot of 'panic' [the fish

114 Ġużeppi was also forthcoming with technical information especially in describing his 'tricks' and tools in the absence of sophisticated electronic devices. Other than the light mounted at the rear of his small boat he uses a lead line attached to a rectangular piece of floating expanded polystyrene and morsels of stale bread or rice that are thrown in the water and followed visually to see in which direction the current is taking them and at what speed. He also uses an underwater viewing bucket to check for fish swarming in a under the boat's light.



is very agitated - gesticulating with his arms] when caught and it was as if he caught his first ever *Lampuka*. He himself was causing panic to make sure it [the fish] doesn't go overboard ! (Charles Abela, 28th December 2017)

However, in a conversation with Ġużeppi (12th June 2020) about this feeling he told me that this expression of 'enthusiasm' was not common to all fisherman. He noted how for example his brother (also called) Lużar (a.k.a. il-Majs, who is described as extremely reserved, methodical and shy) would keep a neutral demeanour throughout the whole fishing process.

The second example is a close-up 'portrait' shot of Antoine in the bridge of the boat, looking down at some instruments. This photograph formed part of a selection of images that Antoine and myself did in preparation for the *Lampara* exhibition (2018).

The photograph was shot through the glass of the front window of the bridge and shows the anchor and other unrecognisable objects reflected in the foreground. Antoine's face is in the shadow in the middle ground of the picture and has a cool blueish tint. A warm yellowish light illuminates the background. Although Antoine agreed to the choice of this photo he also commented (on multiple occasions) that I made him look pensive and 'serious'. There was never any



objection or protest to this effect but the repetition and emphasis on the quality of the image suggested that he might have preferred if I had shown him in a lighter, more jovial, mood.

The root of this desire to be shown as a good-humoured guy can be found in the way Antoine compares himself to his father Ġużeppi. (The latter is loud, funny, irreverent and likes to describe himself – often using flowery expletives - as carefree.) In one of our online chats (13/04/2017) I asked Antoine to give me feedback on a three-minute test video (2017) I had done as a character study of Ġużeppi. His replies were, “My father is comic [...] I bet they [my audience] had a good laugh. You cannot not laugh at him. [...] in comparison I look serious but I’m not LOL.” In this brief exchange I note two important responses to Antoine’s sense of self and how he wanted to be portrayed. The first was confirmation that he measures himself against his father and in so doing inscribes himself into a narrative of continuity. Secondly, that unbounded emotions (such as laughter) can serve as a better means to engage a public.

Lastly, what was noticeable was the way the Egyptian crew members related to me as a photographer-researcher. The crews I worked with came from two different cities on the North Eastern Egyptian coast in the Damietta region close to Port Said. Whilst many of the



men spent most of their lives at sea, they had differing experiences. The first crew I worked with, had extensive experience working with the Lampara method both in Egypt and in Greece. The second crew who were employed in 2016, had travelled less (in general) and were mostly hook and line (long line) fishermen with little experience in net fishing. My interest in their experiences and in trying to understand their language helped me build a rapport with the men from both crews who often took it upon themselves to show me how to tie knots or to explain the meaning of words (in their Egyptian dialect) which I



could not grasp.¹¹⁵

I sat, listened and learnt about their families, their work back in Egypt and their culture which helped break some existing cultural barriers. They seemed to have appreciated an openness to learn and interest in capturing them on film and photographs. This included performing prayer rituals (which led to being repeatedly asked to

115 There were two crews but some individuals would either leave mid-season or not be called again for work the following season. These changes were often the result of discord between the crew members themselves or between individuals and Antoine. One major reason for not being called back was sharing information about catch and fishing grounds with crews from other boats which is seen as a betrayal of trust. This code of silence needs to be seen in the context of rivalry between boats and their competition for finding the best fishing grounds and secure the highest income. This is an interesting subject in itself particularly when one reaches shore. I have often been accosted by other fishermen or crews and asked about the previous night's catch and my standard 'lie' would be "not much", "it was ok" or just "I don't know, I am just a photographer". This was one way of showing loyalty to the *Joan of Arc*, and Antoine and his family made it a point to show that they took note often by telling me, "We like you because you don't engage in useless chatter". (in Maltese the expression is "Ma toqghodx tparla fil-vojt" which, depending to the context in which it is uttered, can be quite loaded.) This sense of 'secrecy' has deep roots in fishing communities worldwide and is connected to accessibility, presumed rights and tenure of fishing grounds. For an extensive discussion and references about the subject see McCay, 1978, p.401-403; Prieto, 2016, p.21-24.



join them in prayer) even though I was neither Muslim nor religious. I was often asked to photograph events whether to commemorate a larger than usual catch or netting trophy fish (eg. a small swordfish or amberjack). At times they asked me to shoot them whilst adopting poses accentuating either their physical strength, friendship or while wearing recently bought or borrowed ‘cool’ accessories like sunglasses or baseball caps.¹¹⁶ As a general rule, crew members were keen to be shown as pious and successful fishermen and were happy that I complied with their requests to take ‘vain’ pictures to be shared with distant family members and on their social media accounts.

Whilst the men were mostly friendly and accommodating, it was difficult to get a critical response about my work and at most the critique was limited to telling me that I could have included someone else in the composition or that the photo or film was dark and wasn’t clear enough. This could be attributed to either the language barrier that existed between us or to cultural deference based on their perception of me as an outsider holding a different level of education (which was also a subject which they often brought up). Their

¹¹⁶ To this one might add ‘virile’ poses and accessories. Within the family archives there are examples of men holding hunting rifles. Identical or similar photographs are found in other families’ archives as can be seen in community facebook groups like *Marsaxlokk Portus Hercules*.

perception of me was as a close friend of the captain and hence it would have been wiser to be nice to me.

The crew's reluctance to provide critical feedback was in itself a reminder of the hierarchical organisation and distribution of power on a boat. However, my experience of the relationship between captains and crews was of a more collaborative egalitarian system, similar to what Acheson, quoting a long list of previous research, calls 'voluntary cooperation' (Acheson, 1981, pp.279-280). So why would the Egyptian crewmen hesitate to give me feedback? One plausible reason could be the cultural and socio-political atmosphere in their country of origin where critique and dissent are frowned upon if not castigated by the powers that be.¹¹⁷ I have explored the way Maltese and Egyptian fishermen display similar attitudes and behavioural patterns in both *Men leaving port at night and the light they carry* and in *The Fisherman's diaries*.

117 The crew members are reluctant to speak about the political situation in their home country. The Human Rights Watch report for 2019 depicts a bleak, deteriorating situation in an Egypt ruled by President Al-Sissi. (For the full report see www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/egypt) Amnesty International also condemns the Al-Sissi leadership for repressive and intimidating measures. [amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/egypt/report-egypt](https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/egypt/report-egypt))

Talking about and discussing my works with the fishermen not only added more layers of understanding to my situated learner experience of fishing, but they also helped develop a more collaborative-creative process with the fishermen themselves as integral to the research project.

4.3 On Interpretation

In relating my experience of working with Maltese fishermen I created immersive audiovisual sensescapes that evoke emotion, sensation and haptic or tactile qualities through strategically composed multimedia environments. The inadequacy of positivist documentary models to convey the complexity of my situated learner experience led me to explore multimedia non-fiction storytelling forms.

The way my friendship with Ġużeppi, Antoine and the rest of the family grew from my long-term engagement with the *Joan of Arc*, Marsaxlokk and its community, and the sea made it necessary for my storytelling to reflect the experiential qualities of my situated approach and the dynamics of my growing familiarity with the environment. In my “becoming-with” (Brunner, 2015, p.12) journey with fishermen I shifted my practice from what might be considered as objective ‘recording’ to a more subjective embodied audiovisual

interaction with the people, the place and the environment of my research.

In my storytelling I evoke this experience of building empathetic relations with the fishermen through the notion of the sensescape as a site of affective engagement. Combining the idea of the senses as interrelated with the city symphony format as a poetic form of non-fiction storytelling, I explored the dynamics of montage techniques to tease out the nuances of lived experience from the way multimedia fragments relate or conflict with each other.

The multimedia approach to storytelling was necessary to my project. The combined use of text, audio, photography and the moving image allowed me to produce storytelling environments that convey both sensory richness and a thickness of description. As I have shown in earlier chapters there is a wealth of qualities that is unique to Maltese fishermen. Through my research I explored this wealth by drawing on the notion of the palimpsest and the fluid archive to structure my storytelling as a non-linear representational construct that brings the qualities of being Mediterranean, Maltese, male and fisherman, amongst other qualities, in a relation of mutuality. Through this malleable form I created a space where the public can speculate on the multidimensionality of fishermen's identities and gain understanding

in the unique kind of tacit knowledge and environment that define these men's occupation.

My long-standing collaborative relationship which the men allowed me to gain insight into the way their personal experiences and abilities, family history, social attitudes, sense of cultural belonging and ability to adapt to fluctuating market demands are woven together. It is in reflection of this personal experience that I created my works as sites where the public can experiment with combining fragments from the prosaic and the poetic worlds of fishermen related to the *Joan of Arc*, and speculate on the complex symbiotic relationship between the people, the sea, the boat, the village and the environment in Marsaxlokk.

CONCLUSIONS

In this project I developed multimedia non-linear storytelling artworks that provide insight into the lives of Maltese fishermen. My research emerged from an interest in finding means to counter the way metanarratives of Mediterraneanity seem to divest local inhabitants of their individual identities and rich cultural heterogeneity. Frustrated by the assumptions that outsiders made about what being Maltese meant, I took stock of my responsibilities as a documentary maker and addressed the delimitations of conventional narratives to propose new storytelling formats that allowed for more nuanced representations of Mediterranean identities. It is within this anti-essentialist spirit and commitment to ethical ethnographic research that in the following paragraphs I present a series of conclusions. These conclusions form my contributions to the evolving

fields of collaborative documentary making processes and current debates about polyphonic, multimodal representations of situated identities.

The questions I set to explore in the beginning of my research reflected preoccupations with the ways lived experiences are mediated and to what effect. Through this inquiry I address key tensions arising from the combination of situated learning methods, creative multimedia practices and experimental non-fiction storytelling formats. Exploring the relationship between the multidimensionality of the ethnographic encounter and the Mediterranean as a methodological model for the creative representation of fishermen's identities I have speculated on narrative constructs, empathic engagement strategies and documentary production.

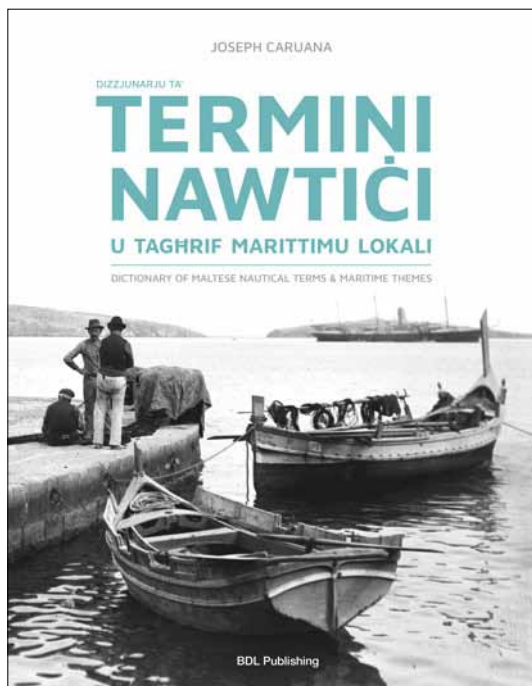
In the first part of this thesis I look at affective ecologies and processes of meaning making to argue for the understanding of identities as complex socio-cultural constructs and it is from this theoretical position that in the second part I reflect on my experience of collaborative ethnographic research methods and make my case for multimodal storytelling practices. In devising my storytelling, I bring to the fore the interrelationship of the prosaic and the poetic and, by consequence, the tangible and the tacit. In unravelling the relations that contribute to the fishermen's sense of self I have examined the

way they relate their bond to the sea, the boat, the fishing methods, the very specific working conditions and the lifestyle that comes with fishing. Through my long-term engagement I have shown how this identification with the material world and the environmental conditions that condition the fishermen's livelihood is also closely bound to family and community relations and histories. These relations form the socio-cultural background to the way fishermen acquire, process and share knowledge and the way they express their identity.

Experimental ethnographic processes provide documentary makers with sophisticated methodological models that allow for the structuring of non-fiction accounts that favour reflexive multidisciplinary processes for decoding lived experiences. A multi-layered non-linear form of storytelling allows for the opening of an interrogatory space within the narrative structure that is akin to the researcher's feeling of wonder and inexperience when confronted by situations, conditions, behaviours and attitudes with which he or she are unfamiliar. In the second part of this thesis I expand on my situated learner approach to show how through the first-person perspective I challenge notions of objectivity and finitude in the representation of identities. In my writing I detail how, inspired by Thierry Fabre's suggestion to consider the Mediterranean as a palimpsest of stories and Iain Chambers' proposition of a 'fluid archive' I steered my storytelling towards complex storytelling

forms that better reflected the multidimensionality of my fieldwork experience and the dynamics of my interaction with people, objects and the environment during my research. In the third part of this thesis I expand on affective meaning making processes and my speculations on perceptual semiotics as developed in the previous two chapters to illustrate how I conceived and produced my immersive multimedia works as polyvocal and empathetic sites of engagement.

The exploration of embodied audio-visual practice techniques brings emphasis to the importance of the affective, the sensory and the experiential in the representation of situated identities and the ethnographic insights that can be garnered through creative non-fiction storytelling strategies. It also adds much needed scholarship to the study of Maltese fishermen. The latter have been understudied with the first (to my knowledge) dedicated study being Finn Wilhelmsen's PhD thesis, *Marsaxlokk: An ethnography of a Maltese fishing village*, which dates back to 1976. Concurrent to my research, in 2017, Alicia Said presented her PhD thesis titled, *Crossroads at Sea: Implications of Marine Policy Initiatives on the Sustainability of the Maltese Fishing Sector* at the University of Kent. At the University of Malta Stephanie Cumbo is working on her PhD research titled *Maltese Fishing Villages: The Fishermen's Changing Identities*, due to be submitted in 2022. Prior to these studies, other research that had been carried out concerning Maltese fishermen appears limited to popular publications mostly concerned with folklore and linguistic



terminology¹¹⁸. In addition to these publications, local authorities¹¹⁹ and internationally recognised bodies such as the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM)¹²⁰ publish regular studies and reports such as *The State of Mediterranean and Black Sea Fisheries (SoMFi 2018, 2016)*

Many of these studies provide less information about individual fishermen themselves and are often focused on collecting data about the size of the Maltese fishing fleet, employment figures, the effort (boats, equipment and methods of fishing) involved, the politics and economic impact of policy making, resource management and general statistical information.

In the early stages of my research I felt that as a documentary photographer I had the ability to put a face to the cold numbers that such studies produced. However, I was aware that the photographic process
118 The online publication www.il-miklem.com and Joseph Caruana's *Dictionary of Maltese Nautical Terms* (2018) are apt examples.

119 For example, in May 2019 the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture that falls under the Ministry for the environment, sustainable development and climate change of the government of Malta published an *Annual Report on efforts to achieve a sustainable balance between fishing capacity and fishing opportunities for 2018*.

120 Under the provisions of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations.

in and of itself did not automatically translate into a reflexive process that could yield new insights into the lives of fishermen in Malta. From previous experiences I also knew that the process of negotiating access to the field necessitated that I not only work through my own preconceptions of what constituted a fisherman's identity but that I also needed to undergo a lengthy process of unlearning with the fishermen themselves to help peel away learnt patterns of behaviour when confronted with a camera. I was aware that in the early stages of my work I would have to deal with the way fishermen perceived photographers and photography and how they have internalised commodified images of Mediterraneanity, masculinity and seafaring. This constituted my first dilemma; with what authority could I challenge the fishermen's sense of self-representation even if I knew that their behaviour was an exercise in self-exoticism? How could my representation be more truthful than that presented by the fishermen themselves?

Addressing the question of narrative power I have shown how through the above line of questioning I came to explore collaborative means of developing polyvocal multimedia narratives.

The long-term collaborative effort between the fishermen and myself helped dilute the power dynamics and equalise the narrative voices in the storytelling process. The search for this equilibrium reflects current academic concerns with the role of the author in the production of experimental documentary making particularly



I have spent hours rowing inside Marsaxlokk port before our fishing trips. Ġużeppi would, half jokingly, tell me that it was essential that I learned to row ‘properly’ before anything else.

those involving new technologies, participatory, and immersive media platforms. Scholarship around the affordances of new media and authorship has been increasingly preoccupied with public engagement, user agency, varying degrees of interactivity in the storytelling process and, as a consequence, the tensions arising between subjective interpretation and factual representation. This research contributes directly to this debate particularly in the way it engages with notions of emplacement and embodiment and the import this brings to sensory perception in conveying insights into the lives of Maltese fishermen.

The relationship I have built over the years with the fishermen needs to be seen in terms of how they perceived the extended duration of my fieldwork particularly in relation to their previous experiences with other photographers and documentary makers. The latter’s contact with the fishermen was generally limited to the time required for shooting and they rarely boarded the boat itself or even expressed any interest in the fishermen’s lives. Within this context my endurance was not only perceived as a serious commitment to the project but also as a sign of deference towards the fishermen; their work, skills and personal stories. Submitting myself to an apprenticeship period also helped reinforce this sense of respect as the basis from which to build a more collaborative relationship. The fishermen and the rest of the family reciprocated this respect by treating me like “any other member of the family” and giving me full access to their lives. This



helped me get a more complete, deeper insight into the lives of my collaborators.

Sustaining this relationship was challenging at times especially because it required that I not only spend considerable stretches of time of just 'hanging around' and not producing anything tangible but also because it was difficult to explain to the men that I needed to stay away from the boat because I had to meet a writing deadline or finish an edit.

Choosing which relationships to sustain was complicated especially because of familial conflicts that I consciously avoided by refusing not to engage in the subject with any of them (all siblings except two live on the same street so my hanging around with Ġużeppi did not go unnoticed). At times this meant that I had to forego of important sources that could have brought new nuances to my storytelling. However, my early association with Ġużeppi (and Antoine) meant that my relationship with the rest of his siblings and their spouses remained mostly cordial throughout the research period.

This division led to what is possibly the biggest lacuna in my representation of fishermen: the absence of female voices. This was mostly due to the gender roles assigned to the family sons and daughters (as also reported by Ġużeppi and Karmnu) by il-Glawd and his wife Gerit. This meant that while the boys were trained to become

fishermen under the strict guidance of il-Glawd, the girls were mostly assigned other tasks and were thus able to develop a closer bond with Gerit. This division of roles was not unlike that of other households in Marsaxlokk and reflects prevailing tendencies in Malta, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century.

There were also other circumstances that limited nurturing these relationships. The unexpected passing of Rosie in September 2018 (the youngest of the daughters, with whom I had already spoken but never had a significant exchange of information), the months of lockdown due to the Covid19 virus and the diagnosis of one of the other female siblings with a terminal sickness in the final months of this research complicated my work extensively and made the collection of further material and interviews next to impossible. These circumstances also limited the testing of my pieces to receiving more informal feedback from Ġużeppi and Antoine. I envisage that, the consideration and inclusion of additional material which the other siblings might be willing to share in the future, and further testing of the current prototype for *The Fisherman's diaries*, will substantially improve my WebDoc.

As articulated in the third part of this thesis, through my lengthy reflection on and experimentation with collaborative and polyphonic narrative structures I became more sensitive to the interrelationships between the senses and processes of meaning making. In other

words, I became more attentive to the relationship between sensory perception and the construction and interpretation of knowledge. This realisation led me to reflect on the idea of the symphonic, the ordering of the senses and the notion of storytelling forms as sensescapes.

The idea of sensescape resonated with the way I conceived fieldwork as an exercise in perceptual semiotics grounded in the particularities of the environment in which I was conducting my fieldwork as defined by the case-study approach to which I subscribed my research. Speculating on this conceptual framework I explored notions of immersion and emplacement in the *Dal Baħar Madwarha* sound installation and the way my audio-visual productions changed after that. Subsequently, and in contrast with the clarity and finitude of the *Lampara I* exhibition, both the two films and the *Lampara II* selection of photographs that I present with this written thesis show a preoccupation with embodied practices that favour the expression of feelings through speculative rather than finite pictorial qualities and editing strategies.

As I have argued in my discussion of films like *Leviathan* and the earlier works by the likes of de Seta and Gardner, this move towards the more visceral qualities that define lived experience comes with its own set of challenges. These challenges became the more apparent when I started working on the prototype of *The Fisherman's diaries* where the assets that compose the online narrative are organised along a structured albeit non-linear path.

I have also had the opportunity to expand my research project in a number of different contexts. In 2016, I started discussions with curators to organise the *Lampara* exhibition in 2017 and the following year, I produced the sound installation for the *Dal Baħar Madwarha* exhibition. During the same period, I volunteered to do some video promo work for the NGO Low Impact Fishers of Europe (LIFE) and since then they commissioned me to produce *Cast adrift in a sea of challenges: perspectives from Maltese fishers*, (2019) a ten minute film for the internet that looks at fishermen's ideas about sustainable practices. During the same year I was invited to participate as one of the stakeholders in the Pericles Heritage Consortium (Maritime Cultural Heritage) funded by the European Union and led by researchers at the University of Wageningen in the Netherlands. Alongside other contributors, we experimented with developing a storytelling mobile phone application that could be used by visitors exploring the Marsaxlokk area. This research group, which is still active, is largely constituted by stakeholders coming from the tourism sector and I often find myself to be a dissenting voice against a majority that is mostly concerned with branding the village as an 'authentic Maltese experience'. My frustration is mostly concerned with cultural commodification and the tendency for self-exoticism and auto-subjugation to 'perceived' expectations of the tourist. However, it is within these difficult conversations that the scope for further development of my project becomes the more evident.



Early in January 2020 I was invited to present my project at the University of Malta. My talk was delivered as part of a series of lectures on oral traditions in Malta, organised by the Department of Maltese studies. In agreement with the organisers, I arranged to share my talk-time with Ġużeppi and Antoine making it very explicit that sharing the stage was essential to the continuation of our collaboration. The talk lasted well over two hours and attracted an audience of at least 150 people. I showed an extensive array of photographs from my work aboard the boat, documents and videos, but it was my sharing of the stage with Antoine and Ġużeppi that ultimately brought everything together. The engagement of the audience was palpable with equal moments of hilarity and pointed questions about my research methodology and the way the fishermen perceived my work and our relationship.

Following this talk I received two other invitations; one from the Mediterranean Insitute and the other from the Maritime archaeology department at the same university (albeit the latter was cancelled due to the Covid-19 lockdown). The event was featured extensively by national news portals (MaltaToday online, 23 February 2020; Times of Malta, 14 January 2020 ...) and broadcasters with a substantive interview during a prime time show on the national television station (*Ras Imb'Ras*, 20 January 2020, hosted by Mario Xuereb) and a feature in the evening news (14 January 2020, report by Liam Carter) in which I was accompanied by Antoine.



The amount of interest that my talk generated was a good indicator of the general aptitude of the public to learn more about the subject. It also gave me more visibility and added to my credibility within the broader community of fishermen and the people in Marsaxlokk thus helping me expand my network for the future development of my work.

Based on my experience within research groups like the Pericles Heritage Consortium and collaboration with NGOs like LIFE I anticipate that this research will find new scope in developing community-based research projects particularly those concerned with representational narratives and the history of maritime communities in the Mediterranean region.

It is my ambition that in the coming years I continue to share, test, develop and publish this project with members of the Abela family, other fishermen and target audience groups. I also aspire to find the necessary financial and human resources to complete *The Fisherman's Diaries*. In developing my webdoc further and as a confirmation of my commitment to my collaboration with the family, I intend to form a production team that further involves the nephews and nieces of il-Glawd who enjoy better relations amongst themselves than their parents do and who have volunteered to support me with the sourcing of new material from the family archive. More importantly they have also expressed their desire to be more actively involved in the future

redesigning of the interface. This includes not only the sharing of ideas for the restructuring of the webdoc but also the contribution of technical knowhow to improve the online experience.

I also envisage continuing my exploration of embodied storytelling practices particularly through further experimentation with my photographic, video and audio recordings and the way they can be brought together in creative multimedia arrangements. This new phase of experimentation will concur with the development and completion of *The Fisherman's Diaries* and I intend to complete this stage of my project by a large-scale exhibition that can serve as a retrospective reflection on the first ten years of my involvement with the fishermen in Marsaxlokk.

The celebratory aspect of such a large-scale event is particularly important not only because it will mark a milestone in my research endeavor but also because it can serve to honour the bond between the fishermen, the community in Marsaxlokk and myself.

The contribution that this research makes to the study of non-fiction storytelling and experimental representations of situated identities can be further consolidated by establishing and nurturing new collaborative relationships between the worlds of art and academic research, and fishing families and maritime communities in Malta and the Mediterranean. Another potential path for furthering the scope of

my work is to apply multisensory methodologies to other fishers such as long-line fishermen and anglers. This application to other contexts serves not only to further test my claim for the need of multimodal storytelling constructs in the representation of fishermen but it also brings attention to how (different) work conditions and equipment impact a fisherman's sense of self.

My experience with Maltese fishermen has shown that multimodal creative constructs of identities can restore equality to the voices in a story. I have speculated on the relational aspect of meaning making and how this relates to the ethnographic encounter; the way we meet, communicate with and choose to represent others. Through this exploration I have raised questions about multilayered sensory-rich non-fiction storytelling forms and the development of creative strategies that promote diversity, dialogue and collective reflection. I hope that other academics, artists and documentary makers continue to question, challenge and develop these strategies as a way to counter the rise of populist ideas, essentialist narratives and isolationism, and remain true to their ethical obligations to the people whose lives they celebrate.

This amount of interest that my talk generated was a good indicator of the general aptitude of the public to learn more about the subject. It also gave me more visibility and added to my credibility within the broader community of fishermen and the people in Marsaxlokk thus

helping me expand my network for the future development of my work.

Based on my experience within research groups like the Pericles Heritage Consortium and collaboration with NGOs like LIFE I anticipate that this research will find new scope in developing community-based research projects particularly those concerned with representational narratives and the history of maritime communities in the Mediterranean region.

It is my ambition that in the coming years I continue to share, test, develop and publish this project with members of the Abela family, other fishermen and target audience groups. I also aspire to find the necessary financial and human resources to complete *The Fisherman's Diaries*. I hope that this will help stimulate reflection and debate within the Maltese fishing community and allow the fishermen to share their knowledge and experiences with counterparts in other parts of the world.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Lampara I

Photography and captions by Gilbert Calleja

Text by John Baldacchino

Our sea

Bend if you can to the dark sea forgetting

George Seferis, Santorini

As we speak of the sea, we must name it.

For people like us, born in close proximity to its savage waves, the sea gets personal. It is *our* sea. In claiming it we privilege our own existence, our own body and place, our own sense of immersion. Like the poet Eugenio Montale, we call the sea *padre* - father-and seek its severity in a law marked by unrestraint.

Our sea is our father. We named it *Mediterraneo*, *Mesogeio*, Mediterranean, the Middle Sea, but also the White Sea, *Il-Baħar l-Abjad*. It is the sea of Poseidon and Neptune - divine names given to the terror of the dark depth in which a briny soup of life and death seeks divinity in what is never named.

Appendix 1

Lampara I



From the stern of the 'Joan of Arc' one early evening at the beginning of a fishing trip. Three boats are required for Lampara fishing. The one on the left is the tow boat (kajjik tal-irmonk) and the small one (frejgatina) on the right is the boat that carries the main source of light under which fish gather and are then surrounded by the net. The *Joan of Arc* is 13.7 meters long and is the main boat of the Abela family.

Appendix 1

Lampara I



Captain Antoine Abela in the bridge of the Joan of Arc keeping a watchful eye on the instruments whilst at the helm. He combines this information to his past knowledge of the coast and present 'readings' of sea and wind currents to find the best fishing spot.

Appendix 1

Lampara I



One of the deckhands stands at the stern of the Joan of Arc praying before sunset.

Appendix 1

Lampara I



The captain has found a good fishing spot. Two of the men wait at the bow for the call to drop the anchor.

Appendix 1

Lampara I

The sea is a divinity whose jealousy has swallowed humanity into its abyss for centuries.

Those who dared their father, went on to face his wrath.

From Odysseus to Aeneas, from Paul to Childe Harold, from the pilgrim heading East to the immigrant heading North, from the real to the mythical.

Drowned young sailors from all centuries are now joined by immigrants, swallowed whole into the darkness of the forgotten.

Appendix 1

Lampara I



Once the captain decides where to anchor, the flood lights mounted on top of the main boat are lit and the two supporting boats leave to place themselves strategically according to wind and sea currents. A lengthy waiting period follows allowing fish to gather around the lit boats. All but one (smaller boat in the middle of the photo) of these lights are switched off before rounding the fish with the net.

Appendix 1

Lampara I



Fish slowly gathers under the lit boats.

Appendix 1

Lampara I

Our love for a paternal origin, whose severe laws stand forever as guardians of a moral imaginary, is also sourced in the bounty that keeps us alive.

The sea has given us plenty. This briny soup of ancient gods and modern tyrants, has always served us well. It gave us the birthmark of filial power marked by the truth of paradox, the beauty of living, and the goodness of death.

If it is not the severity of the sea as father, which the poet fears and reveres, it must be the sacrifice of the son, whose mother—the Spirit—restrains herself in the powers of her bounty, as that love in whose immersion we find solace. This motherly love is the paraclete—the advocate who, in my Semitic tongue, I call *Ruḥ il-Qodos*, yet whose feminine gender was lost in the male tongue of an *hagio pneuma*, a *spiritus sanctus*, a holy spirit.

Appendix 1

Lampara I



Hours later, as the lights on the main boat are switched off the smaller boat approaches to attract the fish gathered around the bigger boat and then paddles slowly away. With all the fish following the small boat, the main boat is able to surround the fish with the net and haul it aboard.

Appendix 1

Lampara I



A critical moment: the Joan of Arc 'closing' and pulling the ends of the Lampara net. This work is done in almost complete darkness. Lights remain off until the purseline at the bottom (leadline and rings) is closed and hauled aboard.

Appendix 1

Lampara I

From the myths of old we are bequeathed a thalassic theology which becomes an aesthetic.

The sea is a creed but also a form of manifestation. It is experiential in that it retains the phenomenological mysteries by which we are prompted to make art. The sea invites us to seek and find.

Long before arts methods or arts research encroached on our jargons of making, artists, like sailors and fishermen, sought and embraced the dangers of the unknown by embarking on journeys hosted by the sea. In the sea we find the consolation of ignorance, which confirms art's contingent necessities.

Appendix 1

Lampara I



As the net is being hauled from the main boat and the space in the net tightens the fish start to rise to the surface in a bubbling frenzy.

Appendix 1

Lampara I



The float line is secured and is then tied to the pole at the top of the bridge. Some lights on the boat are switched back on and the hauling aboard of the fish can start.

Appendix 1

Lampara I

We wilfully forget why we seek, just as we wilfully forget that our thalassic narratives were once marked by Oedipal incest.

The ancients embraced incest so they could gamble with the gods. In this incestuous lineage, the sea lends us a fearful parentage for which we could only lust. This is what urges us to make art, which in its deeds - indeed as forms of doing - we find a peculiar way by which we come to know the world.

As fishermen and artists, we must, as Seferis recommends, bend to the dark sea of forgetting. An inability to forget would be an inability to survive the wrath of our sea's paternal love.

Appendix 1

Lampara I



The fish is then 'scooped' aboard using a smaller net that can carry approximately 150 kilos of fish at a time.

Appendix 1

Lampara I



Early morning and the fish is sold to one of the fish farm operators as fodder for bigger fish like tuna.

Appendix 1

Lampara I

Exhibition at the
Headquarters of the European Commission,
Berlaymont Building, Brussels
June 2017



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



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Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



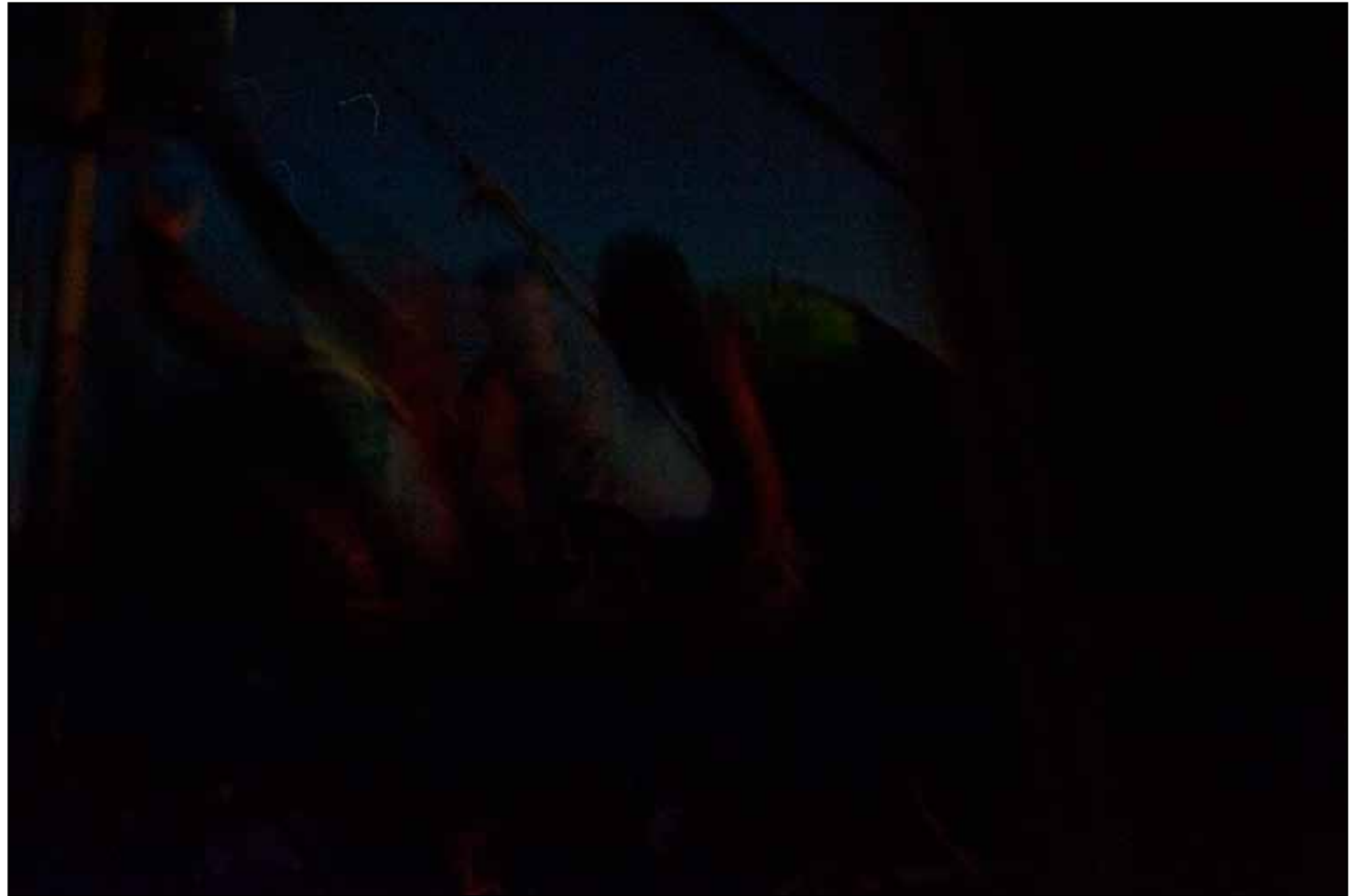
Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

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Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



Appendix 2

Lampara II



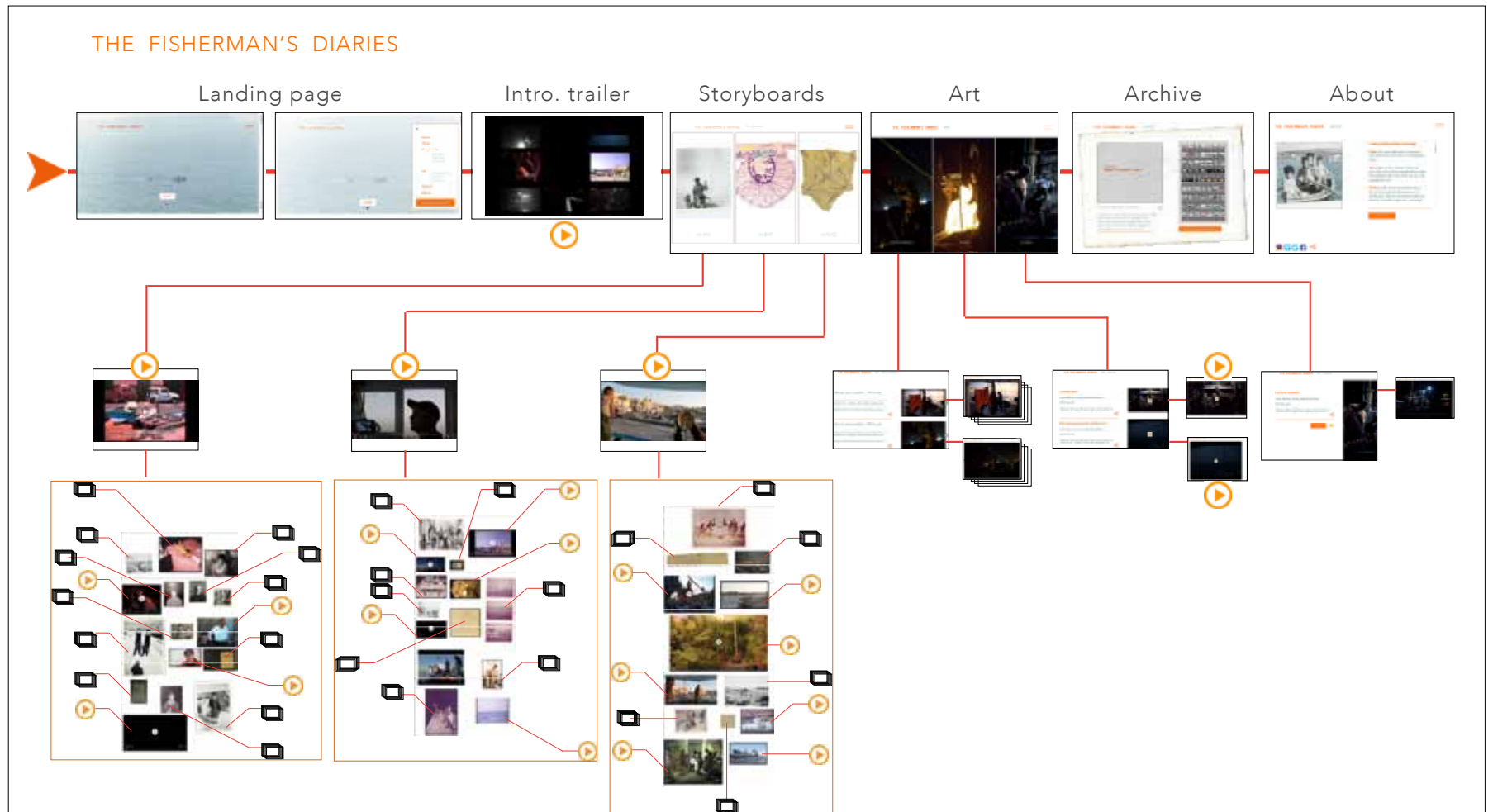
Appendix 2

Lampara II



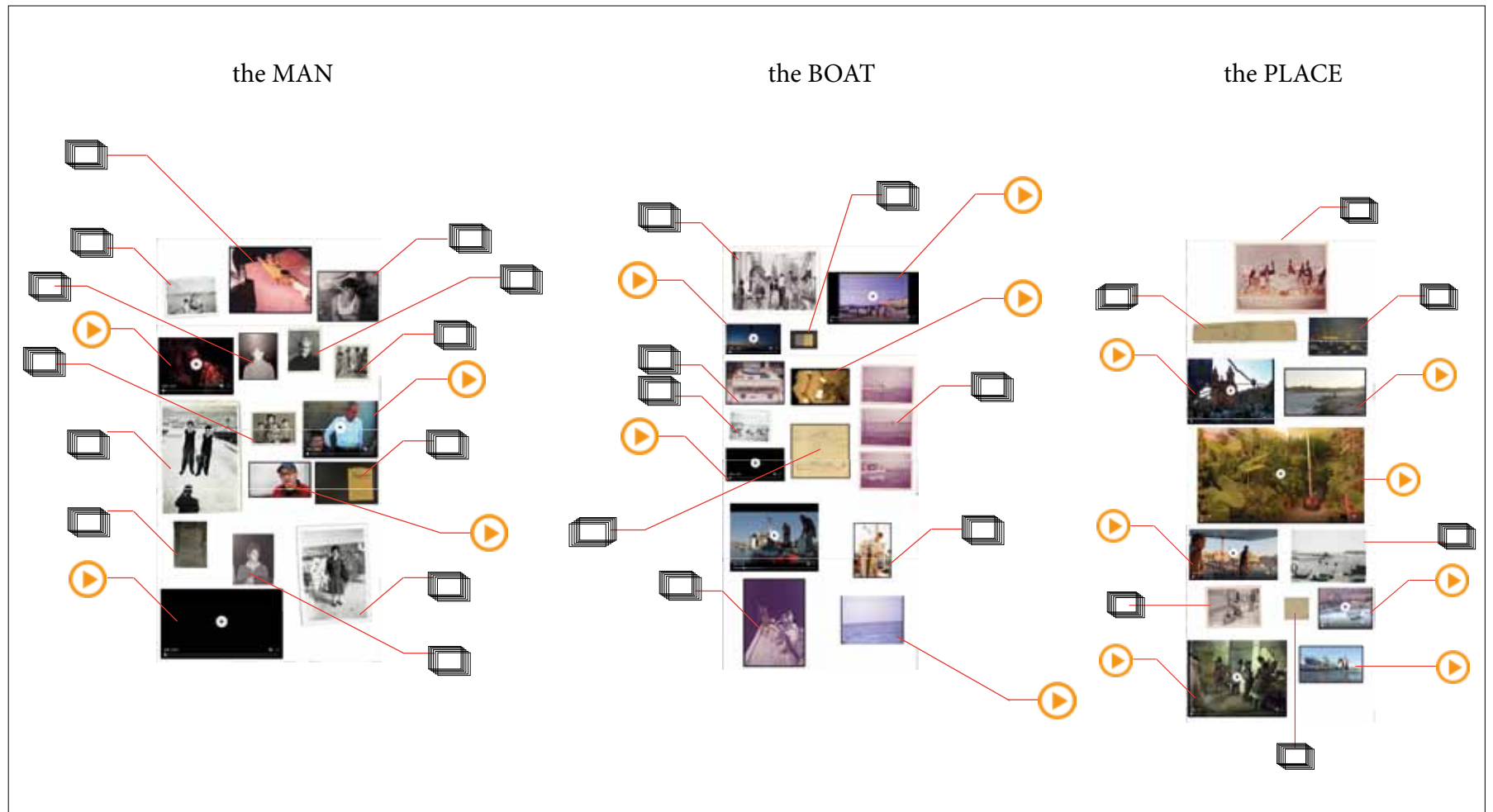
Appendix 3

The fisherman's diaries (webdoc prototype): site plan



Appendix 3

The fisherman's diaries (webdoc prototype): storyboards



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<http://thelookofsilence.com/>

The Shoreline Project, (2017). Online documentary by Liz Miller.
<https://theshorelineproject.org/>

The Whale Hunt, (2007). Online documentary by Jonathan Harris.
<http://thewhalehunt.org/>

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Online links to works submitted with the thesis:

- (i) *The fisherman's diaries*
(webdoc prototype, 2020)
<http://wet.btt.mybluehost.me/sbm/>
- (ii) *Men leaving port at night and the light they carry*
(film, 09:54mins, 2019)
<https://vimeo.com/320727496>
- (iii) *A boat at night*
(film, 09:30mins, 2019)
<https://vimeo.com/324922724>
- (iv) *Dal-Baħar Madwarha*
(5.1 channel, 10:02mins looping sound installation, 2018)
<https://soundcloud.com/user-761694883/v18-gilbert-audio-installation-stereo-mix/s-hfp07>

