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Chapter 34, *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media*

## **The Sonic Summons: Meditations on Nature and Anempathetic Sound in Digital**

### **Documentaries**

Selmin Kara

Over the last two decades, documentary has significantly benefited from the offerings of digital technologies. The emergence of new amateur and professional technological devices, interfaces, and platforms made documentary filmmaking more accessible and center stage amongst mainstream media practices by granting it further mobility, ubiquity, and connectivity. They also paved the way for enabling user participation, database and feedback integration, expanded means of archiving and transmission, and broader forms of inter-medial as well as re-mixable storytelling. However, despite all the interest in fulfilling digital documentary's new promises, filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami and Aleksandr Sokurov, who are known for their frequent crossovers between fiction and nonfiction, seem to have channeled the new documentary's energy elsewhere. Coupling the aesthetic strategies of long-take cinema with abstract, eremitic meditations on nature, the works of these directors shift the focus from increased connectivity in documentary narratives to re-imagined connections among humans, technology, and nature in the digital era.

A re-envisioned ecology of humans, technology, and nature emerges in especially two films, Kiarostami's *Five: Dedicated to Ozu* (2003) and Sokurov's *Confession: From the Commander's Diary* (1998), which are both reminiscent of and distinctive from the two filmmakers' earlier analog works with regard to their image and sound composition. While preserving the uninterrupted flow of imagery through long takes (seemingly similar to the way analog realist cinema applied the technique in order to enhance photographic realism), both films downplay the digital image track's significance in favor of highly structured soundtracks. Composed of dense, layered, and amplified sounds, the soundtracks of *Five* and *Confession* evoke a particular notion of nature as unwieldy, exorbitant, self-contained, and indifferent to the human condition. The cosmic indifference ingrained in their acoustic ecologies has a similar affective import with what Michel Chion describes as "anempathetic sound" in *Audio-Vision: sounds and diegetic music that exhibit a conspicuous indifference to the action or emotion*

depicted in a scene.<sup>1</sup> In the two films, while the image tracks offer little visual or narrative information to the audience, the vibrant and heavily layered soundtracks create the impression of a hyper-sentient nature, unsettling in its non-visual sensory overload and unresponsive towards the viewers' attempts at extracting meaning out of it. The obscurity of visual cues and lack of sonic empathy in the films makes it difficult to interpret the films according to the aesthetic and human-centered vision of traditional long-take cinema. This article analyzes the two documentary works in order to examine the ways in which they stray away from analog realist cinema's often taken-for-granted humanism and gesture towards a new media ecology, along the same lines with the recent "nonhuman turn"<sup>2</sup> in the humanities, arts, and social sciences.

### **The summons of a vibrant night**

The digital framing of nature through static camera shots, meditative long takes, and seemingly minimal editing finds its most formal display in Kiarostami's *Five: Dedicated to Ozu*. The experimental multi-part installation piece (later turned into a film and released on DVD) is composed of five handheld single-take shots, extended over seventy-four minutes with chapter breaks.<sup>3</sup> In the fifth chapter, capturing the barely discernable impression of a pond along the Caspian Sea at night, the image track offers little visual or narrative information to the audience. Conversely, the vibrant and amplified soundtrack, presenting carefully edited and inflated nature

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Chion, Claudia Gorbman, and Walter Murch, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 221.

<sup>2</sup> An eponymous conference held by the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee's Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Studies in May 2012 defined the nonhuman turn as the critical approaches (such as post-humanism, media ecology, actor-network theory, object-oriented ontology and animal studies) that have emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a response to the human-centered formulations of nature and technology in the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

<sup>3</sup> The original video installation has been exhibited in various festival and gallery environments around the world. After its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival in 2004, MoMA acquired the work for its first screening in the US and presented it in conjunction with the Kiarostami moving-image retrospective in 2007. At MoMA, the five segments that made up the work were projected -- in a synchronized loop -- onto five separate partitions dividing the Morita Gallery with a bench before each screen and the audio of each segment blending together at a distance.

sounds such as the rhythmic ebb and flow of water, howling wind, crickets, frogs, rain, and thunderstorm, conjure up the vision of a self-contained nature, inassimilable by human medi(t)ation. A similar aesthetic is also present, to a certain extent, in the third installment of Sokurov's five-part mini-series *Confession: From the Commander's Diary* (1998), a fifty two-minute abstract contemplation about the harsh life of Russian sailors serving around the Arctic Circle. Although a nighttime sequence obscuring the image and privileging the soundtrack, such as the one in *Five*, is not central to *Confession*, the entire third episode of the documentary mini-series takes place in the shadow of a seemingly perpetual Arctic night. The monochromatic looking daytime scenes are filmed at military outposts, which are exposed to only ten minutes of sunlight per day. Here too, the image track offers minimal sensory appeal, while the soundtrack is anempathetic and overpowering.

In the introductory chapter of his influential book, *The Imperative*, enigmatic philosopher Alphonso Lingis ruminates:

When the night itself is there, there is no longer anything to see. The cries, murmurs, rumbles no longer locate separate beings signaling one another or colliding with one another on observable coordinates. Shouts or distant lights do not mark locations in the night but make the whole of the night vibrant.<sup>4</sup>

Lingis's passage on the power of sound in highlighting the sensory aspects of perception presents an evocative application of the two major theoretical moves he makes in his book. In the first of these moves, Lingis revisits Kant's theory of ethics and challenges its human-centered worldview. What he suggests, in place of accepting the call of reason as the only universal directive (also known as *the categorical imperative*) commanding over human actions, is to acknowledge the way perception responds to other imperatives, or in his words, "summons," that come from outside human agency: from the siren-like forces of nature. His second important move lies in a rejection of all forms of holism in phenomenological description. Accordingly, he proposes to describe things, spaces, and elements in nature separately and distinctly, putting in relief their sensual qualities. It is within this framework that the night becomes a crucial setting. The night invites Lingis to surrender himself to the command of the universe by closing his eyes to the obvious (which he later describes as the logo-centric call of the visual field) and shift his

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<sup>4</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 9.

attention to the distinct elements of nature such as its cries, murmurs, and rumbles. Interestingly, it is the call of an equally commanding night that seems to draw the attention of the Iranian filmmaker, Abbas Kiarostami, to the pond along the shore of the Caspian Sea in the last segment of *Five*.

The back cover of *Five*'s DVD summarizes the segment in the following words: "A pond. Nighttime. Frogs. A chorus of sounds. Then, a storm, and finally, dawn." This fragmented description of the Caspian night is striking in that the segment is featured in a work that is itself an assemblage of the depictions of five elliptical scenes from nature, loosely connected through the theme of water. In the preceding four segments, the installation film shows, without cuts, seemingly every day curiosities along the Caspian sea like a piece of driftwood floating on the edge of the shore, people in the distance promenading and staring at the sea, a pack of dogs sitting on the beach, and finally, a number of ducks noisily crossing the frame. In the absence of narration, a clear narrative structure, and visual changes that stimulate the viewer, *Five* is a formally challenging film to absorb, perhaps even more so than Kiarostami's other works, which can all be said to bear experimental qualities. If the slow pace and the obscure content of the film require a certain type of patient commitment from the viewer, the fifth and last segment, featuring the nightly vision of a pond in stormy weather, pulls them into an even more esoteric and impenetrable world. The field of vision is almost entirely cloaked in darkness, yet through the slowly and gradually increasing volume of the sound track, and the rich composition of sounds, a vividly described locality emerges, holding its mysteries till the very end. It is only after the first flashes of lighting during what appears to be an impending storm that the viewer is allowed to distinguish what they are looking at: a pond. The image does not get fully exposed until the very end of the segment when the night leads to dawn. Here, Kiarostami's foregrounding of the nightly nature sounds at the expense of the image suggests an affinity between his approach and that of Lingis. In their rich descriptions of the visible and audible forces of nature (in the name of offering a commentary on the representable world), Lingis and Kiarostami seem to be staging similar interventions to the humanist traditions of phenomenology and documentary. By using meditations on a vibrant night as entry and exit points to their works, they inadvertently undo phenomenology and documentary's holistic and logo-centric depictions of reality.

At this point, it might be relevant to note that logo-centric or human-consciousness based approaches to reality have gone under vigorous attack in recent years, by not only Alphonso Lingis but also scholars like Nigel Thrift and Karen Barad in their recent writings. Thrift and Barad argue that a greater part of our contemporary history of thought has been defined by *representational thinking*, which is the type of thinking that draws an agential distinction between humans and non-human matter in explaining human-nature relations, mostly indebted to the anthropocentric traditions of Kantian rationalism and Humean models of empiricism. Proposing to move away from human-consciousness based approaches to politics, affect, and nature towards revitalized seventeenth-century notions of agency and selfhood, Thrift underscores the necessity of articulating alternative models of subjectivity in the contemporary age of warfare, capitalism, and environmental threat. What he finds compelling in the seventeenth-century notions of agency is a formulation of subjectivity and human action based on *apathy*, or more specifically, “a passivity that is demanding, that is called forth by another.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the direction that one’s actions are to take is left to the demands of nature. Here, the idea of human action put into motion by the *calling forth by another* resonates with Lingis’s invocation of the cosmic *summons*, referring to a commanding call or ethical imperative extended by nature. In directly addressing the topic of nature, Thrift indicates that his work sets out

to escape the traps of representational thinking of the kind that wants, for example, to understand nature as simply a project of cultural inscription (as in many writings on ‘landscape’) in favor of the kind of thinking that understands nature as a complex virtuality.<sup>6</sup>

This passage points to the significance of the trope of nature for the contemporary debates on subjectivity and agency in Thrift’s work. It projects a vision of nature that constitutes a vast field of emergence (in a Deleuzian or Massumian sense) for human and nonhuman action instead of presenting a surface on which certain humanist discourses of reality can be inscribed.

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<sup>5</sup> Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), vii.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

Barad talks about a similar trap in liberal social theories, which put the epistemological emphasis on a correspondence between social or scientific descriptions of phenomena and reality, based on the assumption that the world is divided into representing subjects and passive matter awaiting representation.<sup>7</sup> (The question of representation obviously has significant bearings for documentary media scholarship too, although one rarely comes upon references to the contemporary debates on the human-nature relationships in the field.) While acknowledging the more widely recognized legacy of the Cartesian subject-object divide, Barad traces the emergence of the dichotomy between representations and the represented (as well as the related problem of realism in philosophy) back to an earlier formulation, namely Democritus's atomic theory. She proposes, in its place, a posthumanist framework that "calls into question the givenness of the differential categories of 'human' and 'nonhuman,' examining the practices through which these differential boundaries are stabilized and destabilized."<sup>8</sup> Barad's posthumanism and Thrift's non-representational theory are, of course, only two of the increasing number of alternative frameworks, which point to significant shifts in our contemporary understanding of human-nature relationships. By reading Lingis, Thrift, and Barad together, I do not wish to suggest that these scholars are doing identical forms of theoretical work or that their ideas are directly applicable to the documentary films in question. However, their shared critical stance against human-consciousness based models of thinking in conjunction with their reflections on representations of nature are relevant for contextualizing the type of media ecology conveyed by the long-take nature sequences in *Five* and *Confession*.

### **The media ecology of digital long takes**

The term media ecology, which refers to the interrelations among humans, nature, and media technology, has been around for quite some time. From Marshall McLuhan's Toronto-school media theory to Matthew Fuller's study on the material practices that establish media regimes<sup>9</sup> and Sean Cubitt's forays into EcoMedia,<sup>10</sup> one finds several different formulations of

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<sup>7</sup> Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs* 28, no. 3 (2003): 803.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 808.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005).

media dominated worlds as ecologies. In a special topic issue of the *Fibreculture Journal*, Michael Goddard and Jussi Parikka have also delineated a third strand in media ecological theory, influenced by Felix Guattari. According to Goddard and Parikka, this latest reincarnation of media ecological theory stems

from a more politically oriented way of understanding the various scales and layers through which media are articulated together with politics, capitalism and nature, in which processes of media and technology cannot be detached from subjectivation. [...] Technology is not only a passive surface for the inscription of meanings and signification, but a material assemblage that partakes in machinic ecologies.<sup>11</sup>

By invoking the media ecology of films like *Five* and *Confession*, I am referring to a similar type of framework of understanding the way these documentary works approach the question of articulation -- among documentary subjects, digital technologies and nature. Instead of thinking of ecologies solely as the product of the human-nature interaction, we are compelled, especially in the media-saturated digital age, to take into account the role of technology in filtering our experiences as well as the possibility of a more complex ecology, in which humans, nature, and media constitute equally powerful agents in the shaping of reality.

What of the media ecology in a film like *Five*, then? Although the viewer is presented with a single-take sequence in the fifth segment of *Five*, both the image and soundtracks are, in fact, heavily edited, suggesting that there is only the semblance of an uninterrupted flow in the employment of long takes. What is projected is a discontinuous reality, accessed partially by digital cameras and sound recording equipment. The twenty-eight minute pond sequence is constructed from around twenty takes filmed over several months and superimposed onto each other with invisible cuts. Similarly, the soundtrack of the sequence is also carefully crafted, juxtaposing amplified diegetic sounds from different takes during a four-month mixing process. Despite appearances, there is no necessary overlap among image, sound, and reality based on

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<sup>10</sup> Sean Cubitt, *EcoMedia* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005). Cubitt expands his ecomedia theory with a brilliant discussion of *eco-criticism*, referring to explicit expressions of ecological concerns in literature and cinema, in this handbook. One can also think about the established field of eco (media) art here, including the works of artists like Ruth Wallen.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Goddard and Jussi Parikka, "Editorial," *Fibreculture* 17 (2011): v.



analog long-take cinema's common aspirations for realistic representation. Rather, the audience is presented with intertwining visual and sonic temporalities created by the superimpositions. What gives the impression of an uninterrupted duration in the folding of the sound assemblage over the visual assemblage is precisely fragmentation and the layering of multi-temporal fragments, which reveal or establish audiovisual patterns of a Caspian night abstracted from its various takes. Here, reality emerges not as a product of patient observation in compliance with the rules of human perception, but of a new inter-relational dynamic among humans, digital technology, and nature.

*Five's* foregrounding of audiovisual patterns through layered temporalities rather than continuity in duration is significant with regard to the fact that it challenges the common conceptions related to long takes in analog cinema. Among the most persistent of these conceptions is the assumption that long take cinematography is essentially oriented towards aesthetic realism or preserving events in their physical unity, established early on by French film theorist André Bazin. The artistic endorsement of long takes by canonized directors like Andrei Tarkovsky and Ingmar Bergman after the 1950s, and their coupling of the style with increased shot lengths, metaphysical themes, and contemplative dialogues, helped reinforce this view. In a certain sense, it is mostly through Tarkovsky and Bergman's artful elevation of the style (in the context of an equally anti-Hollywood and anti-Soviet montage cinematic approach) that long takes gained a privileged status in shaping a significant number of neo-realist world cinemas. These highly stylized cinemas, which are at the centre of "slow cinema<sup>12</sup> versus fast films" debates, further made the technique synonymous with a particular formulation of time-oriented filmmaking. This type of filmmaking associates a Bergsonian model of duration, which pictures time and consciousness in a continuous and uninterrupted flow, with heightened realism. In an interview from 1969, Tarkovsky explained his understanding of how analog long-take cinema was ontologically tied with realism:

The specific character of cinema consists in pinning down time. Cinema operates with time that has been seized, like a unit of aesthetic measure, which can be repeated indefinitely. [...] The more realistic the image, the nearer it is to life, the more time

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<sup>12</sup> Also referred to as "contemporary contemplative cinema" by Harry Turtle and "austere minimalist cinema" by Jonathan Romney.

becomes authentic – meaning, not fabricated, not recreated... of course it is fabricated and recreated, but it approaches reality to such a point that it merges with it.<sup>13</sup>

In this formulation, what allowed the time to *become authentic* or the image to get *nearer to life* was the capturing of reality in its uninterrupted, real-time flow by means of long takes, as opposed to the way Eisensteinian montage fractured it through cuts and dialectical editing.

Of course, the camera in Tarkovsky was never meant to be unobtrusive; it did not necessarily seek to capture *life as it is*, the way observational-style documentary filmmaking did through similar techniques. (The long take was initially introduced by documentary filmmakers as a fly-in-the-wall observational device; one can think of Bazin's crediting of Robert Flaherty for the birth of aesthetic realism in this context.) Tarkovsky's camera was deliberate and probing, while the discontinuous, assemblistic use of sound in his films went against the type of authentic realism suggested in the continuity of their imagery. Nonetheless, Tarkovsky's writings and stylistic approach, at least at the level of cinematography and the editing of the image track, pointed towards an understanding of duration based on continuity, which has come to be commonly associated with Bergsonian temporality in the field of film studies. (Gilles Deleuze's Bergsonian reading of Tarkovsky's work in *The Time-Image* strengthened this connection.) In this context, the layered visual and sonic temporality of the pond sequence in *Five* goes against the dominant framework of Bergsonian duration in analog long-take cinema, while also refusing to conform to Eisensteinian montage or contemporary Hollywood style of *intensified continuity*. The temporality evoked by the layering of audiovisual impressions from multiple Caspian nights is more Bachelardian in its compositional logic than it is Bergsonian, in that Kiarostami focuses on the rhythms, textures, and patterns of documentary reality rather than continuity.

In *Dialectics of Duration*, Gaston Bachelard critiques Bergson for setting continuity as an absolute term in defining duration, since Bergson arrives at this formulation by mapping the inner workings (or what he observes as the incessant stream of activity) of the psyche and the body onto the perception and fabric of time. More specifically, Bachelard finds it problematic that Bergson explains duration by recourse to the field of psychology and its human

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<sup>13</sup> John Gianvito, ed., *Andrei Tarkovsky: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 19.

consciousness-centered view on nature -- a view that imagines life, matter, and thought unfolding in a linear temporal progression, parallel to the linear activities of the brain and the body. Within this framework, duration is experienced and intuitively grasped as composed of a uniform rhythm without any pauses, rests, gaps, repetitions or superimpositions. The resulting formula of continuity is inevitably deceptive since it is only through a circular logic that the irregularities, breaks, or intervals in the vast extension of matter outside the human body get ironed out and represented as part of a unified, seamless reality. In a passage exemplifying how this works, Bergson states:

There are intervals of silence, between sounds, for the sense of hearing is not always occupied; between odors, between tastes, there are gaps, as though the senses of smell and taste only functioned accidentally: as soon as we open our eyes, on the contrary, the whole field of vision takes on color; and since solids are necessarily in contact with each other, our touch must follow the surface or edges of the objects without ever encountering a true interruption. How do we parcel out the continuity of material extensity [...] No doubt the aspect of this continuity changes from moment to moment; but why do we not purely and simply realize that the whole has changed, as with the turning of a kaleidoscope.<sup>14</sup>

What the passage conveys is the priority, in Bergsonian thought, of human perception over discontinuous pre-cognitive matter as well as the simultaneously kaleidoscopic and unified whole over independent parts. It is this conviction that opens his work to criticism regarding its anthropocentric and holistic phenomenological approach.

Bachelard rejects the Bergsonian notion of continuity on similar ethical grounds and sees in it a re-working of the Cartesian subject-object divide. Suggesting that Bergson's world consists of a strict division between active subjects and passive objects, he argues that this is a world in which objects are ultimately knowable by subjects, without having any agency or reality of their own:

In this way is the unending dialogue of mind and things prepared, and the continuous fabric woven that lets us feel substance within us, at the level of our innermost intuition,

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<sup>14</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 259-60.

despite the contradictions of external experience. When I do not recognize reality it is because I am absorbed by memories that reality itself has imprinted in me, because I have returned to myself. For Bergson, there is no wavering, no interplay, no interruption in the alternative we have between knowledge of our innermost self and of the external world. I act or I think; I am a thing or a philosopher. And through this very contradiction, I am continuous.<sup>15</sup>

What Bachelard proposes instead of this human consciousness-based model is shifting the attention from psychology to the realm of nature sciences, such as botany and quantum physics, and thinking of temporality in relative terms according to their finds. His alternative to the human-consciousness and continuity-based theory of duration is a theory of *repose*, one that takes into account inactivity and rest, absence as well as presence, and individual instances as well as flow, following observations of diverse temporal phenomena in nature. The choice of the word *repose* and the attention to inactivity bring to mind Thrift's invocation of apathy in his call for returning to seventeenth-century models of subjectivity based of passivity or inaction. Bachelard further suggests that discontinuity, repetition, and rest, as well as temporal superimpositions and rhythms, are integral to thinking about matter and duration beyond the confines of human interiority. That is why, in his formulation, duration lends itself better to an analysis of rhythms (rhythmanalysis) and patterns instead of uninterrupted flow.

Bachelard borrows the term *rhythmanalysis* from the Brazilian philosopher Pinheiro dos Santos, who suggests that non-human matter operates through vibrations on the molecular and quantum levels, and that these vibrations constitute their abstract movement, which might be insensible to and not intuitively knowable to humans. Thinking about the vibrations and temporality of matter in terms of rhythms through the Bachelardian return to the quantum gives philosophy a “sonic inflection, becoming infected by musical metaphors in an attempt to approach something that eludes it.”<sup>16</sup> As Henri Lefebvre, who also takes up the term *rhythmanalysis*, explains:

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<sup>15</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Dialectic of Duration*, trans. Mary McAllester Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 25-26.

<sup>16</sup> Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 85.

[The rhythm analyst] will listen to the world, and above all to what are disdainfully called noises, which are said without meaning, and to murmurs, full of meaning – and finally he will listen to silences. [...] For him nothing is immobile. He hears the wind, the rain, storms; but if he considers a stone, a wall, a trunk, he understands their slowness, their interminable rhythm. This object is not inert; time is not set aside for the subject. [...] The sensible? It is neither the apparent, nor the phenomenal, but the present.<sup>17</sup>

The striking similarity of Lefebvre's language with that of Lingis in interpreting Bachelardian modes of temporal analysis (his call for listening to murmurs, silences, the wind, etc. in order to understand matter) points to the ecocritical dimension inscribed into the topic of duration, via sound. This dimension is often ignored in the field of film and media analysis, as the field tends to take Bergsonian duration as a given. Conversely, Kiarostami's sound and image editing in *Five* sets duration as a relative, matter or object-oriented (instead of subject-oriented) term, deflating assumptions about continuity. His long-take night is a rhythmic assemblage, which takes into account the temporal patterns, superimpositions, and cadences that might be observable among various nights on the Caspian shore, without privileging the linear logic of human perception.

Disclosing that the long-take nighttime pond sequence involves time-lapse cinematography as well as superimposed imagery in the DVD's commentary, Kiarostami downplays the agency of the filmmaker further by pointing to the no-longer-required presence of the filmmaker during filming in digital technology (he sets the camera up and leaves the scene, while the sound is recorded separately) and the relativity of human-consciousness based time. The time-lapse technology used in acquiring the long take shots interrupts the duration of the image, giving it a relative continuity, which is based on machinic rhythms rather than human-based ones. Consequently, the effect of slowness achieved through the process points to a temporal rhythm that is interminable: slowness becomes an affectively charged, virtual mode of reality established by an assemblage of lapsed and superimposed temporalities rather than an effect of uninterrupted linear flow of time. The question in the editing process, then, turns into one of understanding the interrelations among the distinct materialities of image, sound, and

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<sup>17</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythm Analysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 19-21.

profilmic reality: the patterns and rhythms that emerge in their interaction, facilitated yet not fully determined by the filmmaker. “How can I explain this role of having no role?” asks Kiarostami self-effacingly in his DVD commentary, speculating:

Maybe this whole symphony of silence, and then the duet, the trio, and the improvisation of the frogs, or toads, is an interaction of both observation and non-observation, presence and absence. [...] Really, in my opinion, if we imagine life without this parameter [chance], we have lost some of our sense of realism.<sup>18</sup>

Notably, histories of documentary media rarely mention the significance of the element of chance or nonhuman agency for different schools of realism when they deal with the topic. Due to lack of scholarship regarding materialist approaches in documentary, implications of Kiarostami’s digital long-take realism, which is object-oriented and more post-humanist than humanist (unlike most of its analog counterparts) get lost in the vacuum.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, in a strange, somewhat paradoxical sense, there is something postmodern about the subtly post-humanist, object-oriented realism behind Kiarostami’s remarkable collage of superimposed imagery and sounds, as if it is both a pastiche and an appeal to the sonic singularity of cyclical nature-time that folds the past, present, and future onto each other. The paradox, here, lies in the fact that postmodern aesthetics itself suggests artificiality and cultural inscription, drawing attention to the deliberate, the unnatural, and the decontextualized, whereas the “natural sounds” that are used in the sound track have lives and locative realities of their own. While Kiarostami is a masterful composer, he cannot control or produce the sounds of the Caspian night. Instead, he can celebrate them and act as a temporary conductor of an orchestra of sound or a diligent curator<sup>20</sup> in the manner of environmental artists who sculpt nature in order for

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<sup>18</sup> Abbas Kiarostami, *Five: Dedicated to Ozu*, 2003, DVD commentary.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Peterson’s chapter on *Workers Leaving the Factory* included in this handbook also points to the lack of alternative theoretical frameworks dealing with long-take realism. Looking at “Worker remakes,” a cluster of digital documentaries quoting the Lumières’ landmark actuality film, Peterson suggests that the specific long-take realism in these films offers a “conceptual realism” rather than the traditional cinematic realism.

<sup>20</sup> In one of our conversations about the film, Carol Vernallis indicated that Kiarostami’s orchestration of ambient sounds made her think of a style of sound editing that can be best

the "real art" of decay, transformation or erosion to flourish. On the other hand, one can also argue that what Kiarostami strives to establish through this collage might precisely be a new reality, re-assembling and layering diegetic sounds in order to evoke a virtual, previously non-existing audiovisual space, in which natural sounds are heard and juxtaposed in ways that would not have been possible without the intervention of digital technology. The logic behind this latter argument can be traced back to the ideas that led to the ambient music movement in the 1980s, inspired by the technological developments in recording. In his chronicle of the birth of ambient music, a compositional style that he introduced in an eponymous 1978 album, Brian Eno mentions two factors that paved the way for the new movement to come into existence: "the development of the texture of sound itself as a focus for compositional attention [in the 70s], and the ability to create with electronics virtual acoustic spaces (acoustic spaces that don't exist in nature)."<sup>21</sup> By creating a carefully textured acoustic environment of ambient music in which to be lost, Eno suggests that immersion is the goal. The chorus of sounds in the acoustic nighttime pond sequence in *Five* can similarly be interpreted as emanating from or resonating in a virtual space, with its layered, multi-temporal assemblage no longer locating a specific place in time. Where else might superimposed diegetic sounds be encountered if not in a virtual, affective dimension? In their arrhythmic crescendos and decrescendos, cries and murmurs, or soars and dips, the sounds suggest that they belong to no one and not to the image, while the image itself vaguely marks their source location by projecting a kaleidoscopic reflection of it, stitching together impressions of the pond captured in different times.

### **Acoustics of a perpetual night: The Arctic and the anempathetic**

Differently from Kiarostami's five-part film, which pushes the limits of documentary by frustrating the expectation of a narrative arc, Sokurov's *Confession* makes generous use of narrative elements, blurring the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. The hybrid film, labeled as a documentary by Sokurov, features analog video (shot on Betacam SP as in the case of most Sokurov documentaries) yet can also be read within the parameters of a digital audio

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described as "tender curation." I find that phrasing rather poignant and applicable to films or media installation works that employ a similar audiovisual aesthetics.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Eno, "Ambient Music," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), 95.

aesthetics by taking on a different life when viewed with its alternative soundtrack, which consists of stereo sound re-mastered in Dolby Digital 2.0 for its DVD release. In *Confession*, Sokurov exploits the low visual quality of analog video intentionally to create a bleak and prosaic vision of military life around the Arctic Circle, the image of which becomes even further removed from any sensual qualities when the digital re-mastering process amplifies the soundtrack, making the wall of already amplified ambient sound surrounding the bland images more distinct and vibrant. As William Brian Whittington argues, the Dolby digital format foregrounds sound quality and design; therefore, there is a double amplification of sound at stake in the film's DVD version. Here, I take the documentary's DVD version not as a mere diversion from or supplement to the original but as an independent text on its own, following Mark Kerins's call for considering the proliferation of different versions of the same movie in the DVD era as an integral feature of digital culture, requiring media scholars' attention to the differences between theatrical and home mixes in talking about soundtracks. In the context of proliferation, Sokurov's films constitute rich texts for analysis in general as they translate to DVD based digital mixes exceptionally well with their muted imagery, minimal dialogue, and ample use of ambient sounds. More so than Kiarostami, Sokurov is known for his techniques of image and sound manipulation, especially optical distortions, in contrast with the slow, minimally edited look of his cinema. Sokurov is also relevant for digital cinema in relation to his later experimentations with digital single-take films like *Russian Ark* (2002), and Dolby digital sequences in video docudramas like *Taurus* (2000). Toru Soma indicates that immediately after *Confession*, Sokurov and his sound director / long-time collaborator Sergey Moshkov started experimenting with shooting Dolby Digital, which resulted in the peasants (khodoki) sequence of the ensuing film *Taurus* ("How the Ark"). Although the sequence was cut from the final version of the film, it was nevertheless "a blueprint of the aesthetic achievement in Sokurov's next film, *Russian Ark* (2002)."<sup>22</sup> In this sense, *Confession* is a transitional film, preceding, and, in a certain sense, pre-mediating the arrival of a digital aesthetics in Sokurov's work.

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<sup>22</sup> Toru Soma, "How the Ark of 'I' Was Prepared by Sound Technologies: From the Secret Sequence in 'Taurus' to 'Russian Ark', Filmed by Alexander Sokurov," *Bigaku (Aesthetics)* 55-2, no. 218 (2004): 69-83.



*Confession* concludes with a desaturated nighttime sequence, in which sailors are shown pulling a small boat carrying the bosun and a seaman to the naval ship under a heavy snowstorm right before dawn. The human figures appear like silhouettes in the scene, made indistinct behind a thick veil of snow, fog and dimmed imagery. The commands and shouts of the sailors reverberate on the deck but are heavily cloaked by the sounds of the wind, the raging sea beating the ship's hull, clanks of metal, echoes, and non-diegetic classical music. Following the image of a lone young man smoking and lulled by the cradling motion of the battleship to hallucinatory dreams (which Sokurov simulates by superimposing on the dark, stormy waters the ghostly image of the sailor swimming in the sea), the voiceover provides a melancholic commentary:

The sea was big. The Commander smiled, remembering this phrase of Chekhov's. Towards the evening, the bosun and a seaman returned to the ship. They had taken medical officers to the shore. All the crew was on board. We will stay the night here anchored by the shore, till the storm is over and in the morning, God willing, we will move on, wrote the Commander. He added a full stop and went to bed.

The voiceover, which represents the third-person narrative of the battleship's unnamed commander,<sup>23</sup> underscores the sense of existential solitude common to most Sokurov films. The amplified ambient sounds that accompany the voiceover accentuate the powerlessness of the documentary's subjects against the long, turbulent night of the Barents Sea and nature's indifference to their desperate search for purpose. It is true that in both of the nighttime sequences in *Five* and *Confession*, the amplified yet anempathetic soundtracks project a view of nature fundamentally indifferent to the human condition. In *Confession*, however, this indifference or lack of empathy almost takes on a cruel face.

As I previously mentioned, Michel Chion defines anempathetic sound as "sound – usually diegetic music – that seems to exhibit conspicuous indifference to what is going on in the film's plot."<sup>24</sup> The sound of the running water in the shower scene of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which continues uninterrupted throughout and after the brutal murder of one of the film's main

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<sup>23</sup> This is a fictional character introduced by Sokurov in order to frame the sailors' experiences of isolation and mental destitution in the documentary, played by the only actor among the subjects, Sergei Bakai.

<sup>24</sup> Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, 221.

characters, Marion, presents a paradigmatic example of this type of sound by exhibiting an unsettling indifference to the violence that takes place. Although Chion does not discuss how the term might be applied to the use of sound in documentary film, his elaboration of anempathetic sound as creating an *effect of cosmic indifference*, “not of freezing emotion but rather of intensifying it, by inscribing it on a cosmic background,”<sup>25</sup> provides a suitable framework for explaining the function of amplified soundtracks in *Five* and *Confession*.

From a philosophical point of view, there is much more to the idea of cosmic indifference than what Chion’s original formulation reveals. At the level of affect, for example, anempathetic sound is described as indifferent, which suggests a neutral stance. However, in humans, there is no such thing as absolute neutrality. Heidegger would argue that all our perceptions are filtered through moods (*stimmung* in Heideggerian terms). In this sense, anempathetic sound’s blocking of emotions seems intentional because its very refusal to participate in the evocation of mood has a sort of sinister air, a cruelty. Such a reading is representative of Sokurov’s general pessimistic view on nature that runs through both his fiction and nonfiction films, often featuring anempathetic soundtracks. Sokurov states in an interview:

This is a moral issue: landscape as a witness of death, landscape as an absolute category. In itself, it carries an artistic image or idea. Not every human face contains some artistic essence, but every landscape does. Each one is the indifferent countenance of nature looking at human beings, some lofty art that doesn't care whether humanity exists or not.<sup>26</sup>

Conversely, that sound in film conveys nature’s indifference to human agency can be seen as benevolence. This is because anempathetic sound penetrates us and moves through our bodies, inducing precognitive affect rather than conscious thoughts or emotions. Either way,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>26</sup> Lauren Sedofsky, “Plane Songs: Lauren Sedofsky Talks with Alexander Sokurov,” *Artforum International* 40.3 (November 2001), 124.

anempathetic sound is, itself, a sort of sensual, sentient thing if it is thought of in terms of intentionality.<sup>27</sup>

In both *Five* and *Confession*, the subjects behind and in front of the camera seem absorbed or swallowed by the acoustic, super-sentient matter. The carefully curated soundtracks evoke a particular notion of nature as impervious and indifferent to the human condition, in tandem with the formal and technological abstraction of the image. To reiterate some of the audiovisual details I mentioned earlier, the image of the pond in *Five* is almost completely veiled by the night, barely discernable through the occasional reflection of moonlight; and in *Confession*, one sees indistinct figures of sailors blurred through snow, nightly shadows, and constant fog throughout the film. On the other hand, the soundtracks presenting carefully layered and inflated nature sounds create an ambient wall of sound, suggesting nature's indifference to human intervention or agency.<sup>28</sup> There is notably a similar nighttime nature scene in Kiarostami's first digital documentary *ABC Africa*, which features a seven-minute black screen sequence filmed during a thunderstorm and government-enforced power outage in Uganda. Towards the end of the documentary, Kiarostami lets the camera run during a nighttime thunderstorm, filming from a window what seems to be the impenetrable dark reserve of the night. Flashes of lightning, which reveal a few trees outside, occasionally lift the darkness. The scene underscores how power outages confine Ugandans to a life of destitution. It further suggests that nature's independent agency and indifference toward human tribulations are common themes in Kiarostami's work.<sup>29</sup>

### **Object-oriented documentality**

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<sup>27</sup> I thank Carole Piechota for encouraging me to think about the question of intentionality in relation to anempathetic sound and her invaluable comments on the cruelty and benevolence of sound, which helped formulate some of the thoughts here.

<sup>28</sup> I am using the phrase "wall of sound" in reference to the music production and recording technique developed by Phil Spector in the 60s, and its introduction of dense, layered, and reverberant sound in the pop and rock scene.

<sup>29</sup> One can also think of the ending of Kiarostami's award-winning fiction film *Taste of Cherry* (1997), featuring a nighttime thunderstorm, here.

Significantly, digital documentaries' return to tropes of nature as indifferent to human medi(t)ation through a disenchantment of the visual and amplification of the sonic comes at a critical moment. In the 21st century, various disciplines within the Humanities and Nature Sciences have increasingly turned their attention to revisiting the outdated and no longer supportable binaries established around human-nature relationships. This rethinking is evident in the metaphysical turn taken in recent years in the fields of art, humanities, and social sciences. There is also a rekindled interest in the theories of vitalism, panpsychism, hylozoism, speculative materialism, and agential realism, as well as process and object-oriented philosophies.<sup>30</sup> Such theories seek to formulate a philosophy of nature that can respond to contemporary ecological sensibilities and posit nature as an entity capable of acting upon itself without the intervention of human or organic actors. In this context, analyzing digital documentaries' meditations on nature gives us an opportunity to enter documentary in contemporary phenomenological debates and explore emerging forms of documentary media ecologies.

Although it is difficult to establish a direct connection or dialogue between the recent metaphysical turn in the aforementioned fields and the documentary filmmaking of directors like Kiarostami and Sokurov,<sup>31</sup> we can still think about the ways in which films like *Five* and

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<sup>30</sup> Jane Bennett writes about the necessity to recognize humans as participating in a shared "vital materiality," understood as a type of vibrant biopower and resistance inherent in all matter (see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 14); Graham Harman promotes the idea of object-oriented philosophies, for which he sees Alphonso Lingis's work as inspirational; Bruno Latour's actor-network theory draws attention to the agency of non-human actors; and Quentin Meillassoux's speculative materialism contends that we can imagine a universe of objects-in-themselves without depending on models that look for a representational relationship between Thought and Being. Despite their differences, what these theorists share in common is a resistance against Kantian idealism, which sets forth the rational agent as the exemplary citizen of the universe, commanding the environment with his/her faculty of thought alone.

<sup>31</sup> Notably, I have not come upon a direct acknowledgement of the contemporary debates revolving around human-nature relationships by either filmmakers, who are both well versed in philosophy.

*Confession* gesture towards an object-oriented, non-humanist documentary realism. Kiarostami's pond, nighttime, frogs, a chorus of sounds, then, a storm, and finally, dawn and Sokurov's evocation of the acoustic Arctic both suggest a love for things, such as the cries, rumbles, and murmurs of the night. In an extensive study on evocations of place and landscape in independent film and video, Scott MacDonald talks about how nature has been so central to the representational and narrative strategies of fiction and documentary film throughout the history of cinema.<sup>32</sup> However, most of the films he examines are humanist in their orientation and aesthetic discourse. Conversely, the images and sounds of nature presented in Kiarostami and Sokurov's documentaries point to a different conception of the relationship among documentary subjects, material reality, and technology. It is a relationship in which affect and sound obscure the logo-centric field of vision and exploit the hidden patterns of nature instead of representing or capturing reality as it is. The camera as well as the recording and editing devices become equally powerful agents in forging relationships between human and non-human actors. In Kiarostami and Sokurov's takes (or long takes) on nature, humans share citizenship with a diverse population of objects in the universe; they cry out, murmur and rumble their summons for those who are willing to listen.

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<sup>32</sup> Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

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